

Oberlin

Digital Commons at Oberlin

Honors Papers

Student Work

1953

The Voodoo Gospel and The Christian Gospel

William Dewitt Burton
Oberlin College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors>



Part of the [Religion Commons](#)

Repository Citation

Burton, William Dewitt, "The Voodoo Gospel and The Christian Gospel" (1953). *Honors Papers*. 777.
<https://digitalcommons.oberlin.edu/honors/777>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Work at Digital Commons at Oberlin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Papers by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Oberlin. For more information, please contact megan.mitchell@oberlin.edu.

PREFACE

A great deal of interest has been taken in the religion of the Negro American because of its distinctive emotional character.

Elmer T. Clark, in his book "The Small Sects in America", places all Negro religious groups in one general class. He writes:

It would scarcely be amiss to characterize all sects of the colored people as charismatic, since primitive traits attributed to the Holy Spirit, are prominent among most of the congregations of even the largest Negro denominations. Negroes are given to emotional exercises; and shouting, trances, and bodily movements of various sorts are common among them. Dignified worship is rather an exception and is found mainly in a few relatively large churches in greater cities. Even there the familiar charismatic demonstrations frequently break out in their revivals.¹

Henry C. McComas, writing on "The Psychology of Religious Sects" says, "Coloured denominations are very much the same in religious type whatever name they may assume. . . They are the conversion-emotional type, subject to impulse and imitation."²

Both of these quotations, the former written in 1937 and the latter much earlier, 1912, might be overstatements today.

¹ Elmer T. Clark, The Small Sects in America. (Nashville, Tennessee, The Cokesbury Press, 1937), pp. 142, 143.

² Henry C. McComas, The Psychology of Religious Sects. (London: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1912), p. 190.

While the emotional element remains particularly prominent in Negro religion, extreme ecstatic states, trances, and other excesses, have probably nearly disappeared from the historic denominations, but have survived in the cults and more radical "borderline sects". I take this view on the basis of a very limited experience and am not certain that a comprehensive study of Negro religious practice would sustain it.

That a "healthy emotionalism" has survived among Negroes is certain, and it is this emotional strain that students of Negro religion have tried to account for, but concerning which there is still little common agreement. Some find the key to this distinctive religious expression of the Negro in a particular racial temperament. Another school of interpretation holds that Negro religion owes its emotional tone to a "psychology of suppression", religion being made the channel for the sublimation of suppressed emotions. Still another view is that religious emotionalism in the American Negro is a primitive survival from his African culture. I have little doubt that the last of these is the correct explanation. The American Negro is thoroughly Christian in belief, but Voodoo behavior patterns have survived and been brought over into his expression of Christianity.

Traces of Voodoo practice may still be found in parts of the South. The "Hoodoo doctor" sometimes called the "conjure doctor", although rarely known in these times, is not

entirely extinct. I have long been interested in this survival of Voodoo among my own people, but with the exception of a short investigation for a research paper several years ago, I had made no scientific study of it.

When on September 4, 1950 I went to the Republic of Haiti as a missionary for the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, U.S.A., I found Voodoo to be far more prevalent there than I had been led to believe, and I was very ill-prepared to cope with it in the rural area where I was assigned to work. I knew also that after two years I was to go to Liberia, West Africa, where I would find a similar situation. I then set about to learn all that I could about Voodoo.

Two main reasons, then, led me to attempt an investigation of the Voodoo religion: (1) My own people here in America, and indeed I myself, have been influenced by the Voodoo tradition. To understand Voodoo is to understand better the American Negro. (2) The prospect of going to West Africa to work where Voodoo still flourishes called forth the need of understanding as much as possible of this primitive religion in order that my ministry among the people who practice it might be as effective as possible.

My aim in making this study has been to describe Voodoo in its historical setting, to depict it in its relation to Catholic and Protestant Christianity in the Republic of Haiti, Voodoo's last Western stronghold, to show that Voodoo is a

genuine religion which contains values worthy to be preserved, but that it is essentially an inferior religion which ought to be superseded by Christianity, and finally to suggest-- and only to suggest--a general Christian strategy for dealing with Voodoo.

Materials for this study have been taken from the written works of American, British, and Haitian scholars, from observations made at Voodoo services in and around the town of Saint Marc, which is situated in the heart of Haiti's Artibonite Valley, and from numerous interviews and conversations with Haitians of various walks of life and with American missionaries who have lived for many years in Haiti.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. WHAT VODOO IS.	1
The Meaning of the Term Voodoo	1
The Origin of Voodoo	2
Voodoo in Haiti.	4
Is Voodoo a Cult of Serpent, Sex, and Blood?	8
Is Voodoo a Genuine Religion?.	13
II. THE VODOO DOCTRINE OF GOD.	17
The Existence of God	17
The Nature of God.	18
God as Creator	23
God in Nature.	29
God in the Life of Man	31
Good and Evil in the World	36
The Christian God in Haitian Voodoo. . .	39
III. THE VODOO DOCTRINE OF MAN, SIN, AND SALVA- TION.	42
The Concept of Human Nature.	42
Nature and Human Nature	43
Human Nature and Society.	46
Human Nature in Relation to God . . .	49
Sin and Salvation.	49
Notions of Immortality	52

CHAPTER	PAGE
IV. THE VODOO CHURCH AND ITS MEANS OF GRACE. .	58
The Voodoo Temple.	60
Administration of the Temple	61
The Vêvers	62
Initiation of Hounsi-Canzo	63
Possession	71
The Service of Brûler-Zin.	75
Sacrifices	77
SUMMARY	79
V. HAITIAN VODOO AND CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM . .	90
The Attitude of the Haitian Government Toward Voodoo.	91
Voodoo and Catholicism	93
Voodoo and Protestantism	99
Voodoo's Apologists.	103
CONCLUSION.	109
BIBLIOGRAPHY.	119

CHAPTER I

WHAT VODOO IS

I. THE MEANING OF THE TERM VODOO

The word "voodoo" has been thought by some writers to be derived from the followers of Peter Valdo, called Vaudois or Waldenses, a twelfth century sect of dissenters from the system of the Roman Catholic Church. Proponents of this view believe the Vaudois to have later spread to Haiti taking the name with them.¹

This seems to be an erroneous view, however, the prevailing belief being that the term is of African origin. According to Newbell Puckett, "voodoo" probably comes from the word "vo", which belongs to the Ewe language of the Slave Coast of Africa, and means "to inspire fear", signifying in its broadest sense "one who inspires fear" or a god. The word transliterates into English as "vodu" and is applied by the Ewe-speaking natives to any god rather than being the name of a special god.²

Harold Courlander believes the term to come from the Fon-speaking peoples of Dahomey, West Africa, where it was

¹ Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. XXIII.

² Newbell Niles Puckett, Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926), p. 177.

used to designate superhuman beings in general. He notes that the Yoruba people had a word "orisha" which meant the same thing. The word "bahsum" of the Tshi tribes and the word "wong" used by the Ga express an identical idea. In course of time the Fon word came to dominate and the others passed from use. The Congo word "loa" somehow entered the vocabulary of the Fon people and came to identify the spirit being itself, while "vodu" continued to designate the conception of spirit in general.³

Doctor James G. Leyburn agrees that the word "voodoo" is of Dahomean origin, and points out that it is the same etymologically, whether it be Haitian "Vodou" or "Vodun", French "Vaudoux", Spanish "Judu", or American "Voodoo", sometimes corrupted to "hoodoo" by the American Negro. It is the generic term for all deities.⁴

II. THE ORIGIN OF VOODOO

The ancient cult known to us as "Voodoo" is, so far as it has been possible to determine, native to Africa, where it flourishes today just as it did thousands of years ago. But, like all religions, Voodoo has been subjected to

³ Harold Courlander, Haiti Singing. (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939), p. 7.

⁴ James G. Leyburn, The Haitian People. (New Haven, Connecticut: The Yale University Press, 1941), p. 133.

modifying influences. Doctor Pierre Mabilie, Haitian scholar, who, with Dr. Louis Maximilien, has made a careful study of Voodoo, both in its origin and historical development and in its present Haitian form, states that this primitive faith was already syncretistic, comprising diverse African and non-African strands, before being transplanted by Negro slaves to the New World. He writes:

African rites in the seventeenth century were singularly mixed. Primitive animism, which goes back to a very distant past, had received diverse influences which were forged into its structure. The Egyptian influence, the influence of the Mediterranean cults, of Islam--all these currents were propagated, modified, across the vast continent of Africa. Although the black civilization was deeply marked by animism, there is no doubt that it had direct relations with other civilizations which developed around the Mediterranean.⁵

In addition to these ascertainable influences, Maximilien believes that metaphysical ideas in Voodoo go back four thousand years before Christ to the old dynasties of the Egyptian pharaohs. It is believed that Egypt dominated the Black Continent as she influenced the Greeks,⁶ this either by direct impact or through the medium of Cretan civilization.⁷

⁵ Louis Maximilien, Le Vodou Haitien. (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie de L'Etat, 1945), p. xvii.

⁶ Maximilien writes, "Hellenic civilization shows indisputable oriental influence. The Homeric poems, notably in the poetic and artistic themes show this influence. An example is that of the Shield of Achilles where country life is divided into as many pictures as there are seasons in the year. The order adopted by the Homeric rhapsody is that of the Egyptian tomb decorated." Ibid. pp. xxvi, xxvii.

⁷ Ibid., p. xvi.

Beyond this nothing is known of the beginning of this ancient religion. Its origin seems to be completely lost in an unwritten past. A Voodoo devotee is reported to have given the following explanation of the beginning of the cult: "God and his woman went into the bedroom together to commence creation. That was the beginning of everything, and Voodoo is as old as that."⁸

III. VOODOO IN HAITI

Melville J. Herskovits, who is considered the leading American authority on Dahomean civilization, states that Dahomean culture may be taken as typical of the entire West African region; for this powerful dynasty conquered and dominated the whole region, and prior to 1892, was careful to exclude all foreigners from it.⁹

The invasion and subjugation of Ardra by the Dahomeans occurred in 1724, and three years later Whydah was conquered by the same foe. It was during this period that Voodoo was transplanted to Haitian soil,¹⁰ although African slaves had been transported to Haiti as early as 1506.¹¹ The Obea and

⁸ Zora Neal Hurston, Tell My Horse. (New York: J. P. Lippencott Company, 1938), p. 137.

⁹ Melville J. Herskovits and Frances S. Herskovits, "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief", American Anthropologist. (No. 41, 1953), p. 7.

¹⁰ Puckett, op. cit., p. 178.

¹¹ Mable Steedman, Unknown to the World. (London: Hurst and Black, 1939), p. 211.

Wanga cults, elements of which are found in Haiti today, and which are frequently confused with Voodoo, probably came to the island during this same period.¹²

Haiti draws her ancestry from scores of African tribes. Of these Harold Courlander lists 360, which number he calls "pitifully inadequate". These tribes, each of which had its distinct language and customs, were scattered over a vast area, including North West Africa, Sierra Leone, The Gold Coast, the region from Cape Appolonia to Volta, Togo, Dahomey, West Nigeria, the Interior of the Coast, the Congo Basin, the Ivory and Grain Coasts (Liberia), the Niger Basin, and Angola.

It is thus seen that Haitian Voodoo must of necessity show variety and complexity. Nevertheless, a remarkable degree of unity is observable in its belief and practice. This is explained by the fact that the Dahomean strand, which was already dominant in Africa, soon came to dominate in Haiti also,¹³ due to the numerical preponderance of the Dahomeans, and the colonial policy of dispersing slaves all over the colony.¹⁴

Haitian Voodoo is further complicated by the intermingling of African Secret Societies, if the thesis of Captain

¹² E. Washburn Hopkins, The History of Religion. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923), p. 30.

¹³ Courlander, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁴ Leyburn, op. cit., pp. 135-36.

Butt-Thompson is to be admitted. In his book "West African Studies" he classifies these orders as Mystic and Religious, Democratic and Patriotic, and Subversive and Criminal, and points out that West Africa alone has more than 150 such societies. One of these groups, called the Nimm, of the classification Mystic and Religious, Captain Butt-Thompson describes as a "brotherhood of the order of Hebrew Levites", and believes to be the oldest of the societies of mixed membership. He finds that this brotherhood "influenced greatly the Ekoi of Nigeria and is also found in Sierra Leone, Liberia, the Ivory Coast, and French Congo." This society was taken by slaves from Nigeria to Santo Domingo. To the Nimm Society of the Ngbe, which, with the Oro, influenced a vast amount of territory, Captain Butt-Thompson believes elements of Haitian Voodoo to be definitely traceable.¹⁵

Perhaps equal in importance to those just cited, in fixing the form of present-day Voodoo in Haiti, are certain non-African influences. Maximilien has put forward the proposition that the meeting of the Negro and the Indian in America resulted in a mutual exchange of culture. The Haitian writer describes an Indian rite which is very briefly condensed here. Mexican merchants, when leaving home to go to their businesses, invariably invoked their god to give them a favorable sign, whereby they would know if the day would be successful. In

¹⁵ Steedman, op. cit., pp. 214-15, citing Captain Butt-Thompson in West African Studies.

the middle of the night before departure, a merchant cut paper to make an offering to the fire called "Xiuhtecutli". Figures of flags were cut and attached to red staffs. This done, a substance called "ulli" was melted in a copper tube. By allowing the liquid to pass out of the tube drop by drop, the figure of a man, representing the sun, was drawn. Quails were sacrificed, a little of the blood being sprinkled on the paper, after which gestures were made in the direction of the four cardinal points. Precisely how indications of good or ill fortune were drawn from this type of augury Maximilien does not state, but he tells us that all of these practices have been preserved in Haitian Voodoo.^{16*}

Along with the influence of this indigenous Caribbean culture, Freemasonry has contributed to the present form of Haitian Voodoo. It is known that lodges flourished in Santo Domingo at the end of the eighteenth century, and freedmen were initiated into the order. In the designs of certain vêvers (motifs employed in Voodoo ceremonies), in the hierarchy of the initiation, and in certain passages of the ritual, the influence of Freemasonry may be seen. In the outskirts of Port-au-Prince mutual exchange of these two

¹⁶ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 42-45.

* Dr. George Eaton Simpson of Oberlin College states, "I doubt the Indian influence on Haitian Vodun; the cult took form in Haiti between 1510 and 1520, and at that time Indian culture had completely disappeared."

disciplines is said to be not uncommon.¹⁷ In Guadeloupe African traditions are reported to be partially conserved under the shelter of Masonic lodges, while outside of them these traditions exist only as dangerous sorceries.

By far the greatest modifying force upon Voodoo in Haiti has been that of the Catholic religion. Maximilien declares that Catholic elements constitute more than one-half of present-day Haitian Voodoo. In many instances the Haitian has unified in his conception the two cults, Voodooism and Catholicism. He worships the Catholic God and observes the rites of the Catholic Church. He attends mass and kneels in prayer like any faithful adherent. In doing this he does not consider himself to have departed from his Voodoo practice. When he returns to his Voodoo service he takes Catholic prayers and chants with him--and Catholic saints as well. The ceremonies of the church he considers as the part open to outsiders, the essentially Voodoo rites as the part reserved for the initiated. The secret initiation is that which, in his opinion, he holds in common with the Catholic priest.¹⁸

IV. IS VOODOO A CULT OF SERPENT, SEX, AND BLOOD?

Sir John Spencer, near the end of the nineteenth century,

¹⁷ Pierre Mabilie, Preface to Maximilien, op. cit., p. xix.

¹⁸ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 5.

wrote:

Vaudoux. . . signifies an all powerful being, on whom all events depend which take place in the world. This being is the non-venomous serpent, and it is under its auspices that all who profess the doctrine assemble. Acquaintance with the past, knowledge of the present, prescience of the future, all appertain to this serpent.¹⁹

And E. Washburn Hopkins notes that "Voodoo requires a priest or a priestess and a snake, or it is no real Voodoo. . . . White Voodoo is content with a cock or goat. Red Voodoo requires human victims."²⁰

Sir James George Frazer, eminent authority in mythology and folk lore, observes:

The natives of Dahomey for some unaccountable reason worship their divinity under the form of a particular species of snake, called Daboa, which is not sufficiently large to be terrible to man, and is otherwise tamable and unoffensive. These Daboas are taken care of in the most pious manner, and well fed on rats, mice, and birds, in their fetish houses or temples, where the people attend to pay their adoration, and where those who are sick or lame also apply to them for assistance.²¹

Maximilien, while admitting that serpents have been found in the care of Voodoo priests, rejects the idea that these animals are worshipped or that they play any essential role in the cult. "Voodoo," he writes, "is not a serpent cult

¹⁹ John Spencer, Hayti, or the Black Republic. (New York: Scribner and Welford, 1889), pp. 193-4.

²⁰ Hopkins, op. cit., p. 30.

²¹ James George Frazer, The Native Races of Africa and Madagascar. (London: Percy Lund Humphreys and Company, Ltd., 1938), pp. 394-95.

any more than Egyptian cults could be called falcon cults, although serpents have been found carefully nurtured in a houmfort. This is but a prehistoric vestige."²²

The Haitian writer, whose diligence as an investigator is hardly open to question, often enters upon the role of apologist when discussing Haitian Voodoo. Here he admits by inference that the serpent may have played an important role in Voodoo worship in the past, but is now only a "prehistoric vestige". But he offers no explanation of its present appearance.

Herskovits sheds light upon the controversial question in delineating the hierarchy of Dahomean divinities. He explains that the pantheons of the gods are thought of as public gods whose chief function is to protect and nourish. There follows the ancestral cult, made up of deified ancestors and the spirits of those who have recently died. After this come the lesser gods, stemming from the pantheons, who have been sent to live on earth among men, and who have on occasion mated with human beings. Lastly there are the personal gods and forces. Among these are numbered magic, which has many forms, and the serpent, which is thought to bring wealth. On this last level, properly speaking, is found the fetish.²³

²² Maximilien, op. cit., p. 4.

²³ Herskovits, op. cit., pp. 10-11.

The investigator is left to draw his own conclusions from the foregoing observations. This researcher is convinced that Voodoo is not a serpent cult. At no ceremony that he witnessed was a serpent ever in evidence. The serpent rarely appears, and when it does is not worshipped as a god, but is to be classified along with the talisman and charm, which are believed to have the power to influence fortune.

How prominently does sex figure in Voodoo practice, and what is its significance? Richard A. Loederer describes a Voodoo ceremony which he attended in company of a German coffee grower who had renounced civilization and had lived for many years in the jungle. High in the hills above Jacmel in Haiti Mr. Loederer witnessed a weird moonlight ceremony of the Ghédés over which a youthful and beautiful mamaloï presided stark naked, and which ended in an unrestrained orgy of sex in which the blood-bespattered bodies (from the sacrificial baptism of blood) writhed in sensuous ecstasy till dawn. The author alone did not participate in these mysterious exercises.

The judgment of this inquirer is that Mr. Loederer has gone beyond merely embellishing his delightfully written tale with frills fashioned out of his own sensuous imaginings, but that he has deliberately given himself to the task of producing sensational literature.²⁴

²⁴ Richard A. Loederer, Voodoo Fire in Haiti. (New York: The Country Life Press, 1935), pp. 265-74.

It should be noted that Loederer is an artist who spent three weeks in Haiti. He is cited here as an example of the sensational writing concerning Voodoo which flooded the American market during the thirties.

In the cult of the Ghédés, which Mr. Loederer purports to describe, and parts of which this investigator has seen, the acts of copulation are mimicked in a dance. This symbolizes the resurrection of the dead to new life. In earlier times, according to Maximilien, the priest of the cult was wrapped in the skin of a newly sacrificed animal, and assuming the position of a fetus, was carried on a sleigh among the people. This was the act whereby the king was revitalized and all dead accorded eternal life. Voodoo practice in Haiti has undergone considerable change. Instead of the bloody skin of a sacrificed animal, a frock coat with red frills is substituted. And the priest, instead of assuming the position of a fetus to symbolize new birth, executes an erotic dance in which he mimics the act of copulation. These two acts taken together symbolize generation and new birth.²⁵

Voodoo is a religion of symbols. These symbols are often misunderstood and taken literally. Sex relates to the source of life, and every reference to it is not to be interpreted as having erotic significance. According to Zora Neale Hurston, the uplifted finger in Voodoo greeting is a phallic symbol, signifying the masculine attributes of the Creator. The female attribute of creating deity is indicated by a handclasp in which the fingers of one hand encircle the thumb

²⁵Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 122-24.

of the other, as the vulva encircles the penis. Even where sex in its fullest physical expression--if this occurs--finds a place in Voodoo, it has religious significance. When asked ritualistically "What is truth?", a mamba is reported to have thrown back her garments and bared her sex organs. This to her symbolized infinite, ultimate truth, and emphasized more eloquently than words could, that there is no mystery beyond the mysterious source of life.²⁶

In order to understand Voodoo it is essential to realize that many different branches have been grouped under the one word "voodoo". There are sects and societies which preserve a very ancient tradition. There are the indigenous Haitian groups. One may find that charlatanry, Black Magic, sorcery, and every imaginable kind of fraud exist. But there are the genuine cults also. Real Voodoo is in no sense synonymous with Black Magic. While some Voodoo priests undoubtedly stoop to sorcery to obtain money, the majority probably do not.

V. IS VOODOO A GENUINE RELIGION?

Many persons have failed to distinguish between the genuine Voodoo and the fraudulent cults which have been grouped together indiscriminately under its name. Some have described it as being nothing more than

26

Hurston, op. cit., p. 27.

sorcery.²⁷ Others have accorded it more elevated rank.

The following are some representative opinions.

Courlander defines Voodoo as "a highly formalized and sophisticated attitude toward life." He continues, "Vodun is not a cult, nor in the limiting sense, a religion; yet it is both and more. It is the relationship of the Haitian to the world of reality, the world of the unseen as well as the seen."²⁸

W. B. Seabrook describes Voodoo as being "primarily and basically worship, its magic, sorcery, and witchcraft are only secondary collateral, sometimes sinisterly twisted by-products of Voodoo as a faith, precisely as the same thing was true in catholic medieval Europe. In Haiti it is a profound and vital religion."²⁹ Elsewhere the same author refers to Voodoo as a form of pantheism, "a sort of nature worship finding its divinities in the various forms of nature."^{30*}

²⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. XXIII. James G. Leyburn remarks concerning this article "Evidently the author of the encyclopedia article had made no serious investigation of the subject." Leyburn, op. cit., p. 133.

²⁸ Courlander, op. cit., p. 3.

²⁹ W. B. Seabrook, The Magic Island. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929), p. 12.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 317.

* It should be noted that Mr. Seabrook is an adventurer rather than a social scientist. However his observation here seems admissible.

Is Voodoo a genuine religion? The answer to this question is found in the answer to the question, "What is religion?" The aim and scope of this project do not permit of an extended discussion of this question, nor is such a discussion deemed necessary. Consideration of the subject is here limited to the opinions of two persons, who may be regarded as experts. Daniel G. Brinton writes:

Most people confine the term religion to the historic faiths and cults, calling others superstitions. . . Such distinctions cannot be recognized in ethnology. The principle at the basis of all religions and superstitions is the same. The grossest rites of barbarism deserve the name of religion as much as the refined ceremonies of the Christian churches. The aims of the worshipper may be selfish and sensuous. There may be an entire absence of the ethical intention. His rites may be empty formalities and his creed immoral, but this will be his religion all the same, and we should not apply any other name to it.³¹

If so liberal a definition of religion may be admitted, Voodoo, of course, cannot be excluded. Referring specifically to Haitian Voodoo, here is what a well-known sociologist has to say:

Vodun is a true religion, in the same sense that Mohammedanism, Buddhism, or Christianity are all true religions. That is to say, it is a set of beliefs and practices which claim to deal with the spirit forces of the universe, and to keep the individual in harmonious relation with them as they affect his life. The word superstition is relative. It is a subjective term, being generally applied to beliefs which we consider ourselves too wise, too advanced to cling to. The sophisticated

³¹ Daniel G. Brinton, Religions of Primitive Peoples. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897), pp. 27-28.

skeptic calls the belief in miracles superstition; the Christian regards the reverence for certain animals in India superstition: it is all a matter of view. Using the greatest number of criteria available for the definition of religion as distinct from vague superstition, religion may be said to be a set of beliefs about spirits or gods and their nature, about the origin of the world, about good and evil, about man's relation to the universe he knows; it includes a set of practices of worship; it is an attempt to ward off misfortune and to get good; it treats of what happens after death; it is a system of seeking security, solace, and support in the face of a supposed supernatural. Vodun is all of these.³²

³² Leyburn, op. cit., p. 134.

CHAPTER II

THE VODOO DOCTRINE OF GOD

I. THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

Belief in a God of some kind is universal. All religions say in one way or another that man is vitally related to and dependent upon a power or powers which reside outside himself. However primitive his conception of God may be, man is aware that he (man) is not the independent center of the universe, that there are forces over which he has no control and on which he depends for life. There is usually a sense of sharing in some way the nature of this power, and the need of devising ways of behaving toward it so as to win favor and fullness of life.¹

In primitive religion nature teams with spirit beings. It has been said that man has worshipped everything he could think of on earth, beneath the earth, and in heaven. Sometimes objects of nature are worshipped as being living and active. Sometimes the object is not itself worshipped, but the spirit with which it is believed to be animated. Veneration of stones, worship of plants, trees, and animals, and religious devotion to ancestors have been found to be

¹ John B. Noss, Man's Religions. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), pp. 3, 4.

virtually universal among primitive peoples.²

Sir James George Frazer points out that perhaps the one universal element in primitive religion, found everywhere and probably more ancient than animism, is belief in the efficacy of magic.³

Also common to the religion of primitive peoples seems to be the idea of a Supreme Creator-God. Recognition of the existence of such a Being is found everywhere in Africa, including the coastal regions of West Africa to which Voodoo is native.⁴ There is in Voodoo no argument for the self-evident existence of such a God and the prevailing opinion is that He has not the religious significance of the more intimate spirit-powers with which primitive man is daily concerned.

II. THE NATURE OF GOD

It has been shown that all over Africa there is found belief in a Supreme Being. But in some regions no well defined conception of the nature of this Being can be discovered. The one attribute of God that seems to be acknowledged throughout the continent is His utter transcendence, His complete inaccessibility. Although recognized, He is not

² Noss, op. cit., p. 18.

³ Cited by Henry Nelson Wieman and Walter Marshall Horton, The Growth of Religion. (Chicago: Willett, Clark, and Company, 1938), p. 12.

⁴ Noss, op. cit., p. 20.

"utilized", to borrow a term from Sir James George Frazer.⁵

Eva N. Dye found among the Nkundoes of the Congo a vague idea of a Supreme Creator-Being who was capable of both good and evil, but who was neither feared nor supplicated.⁶

Nassau notes that the Barotse tribe believe in a Supreme Being who will come some day to take away the spiritual part of the dead. Thus this God is thought of as exercising ultimate control over human life and destiny.⁷ In certain other regions God is an exalted being possessing creative power. Names used in referring to Him frequently indicate this attribute, although there is not to be found a term relating to this aspect of God's nature which applies intertribally. Among the Zulus the names "uDio", "uTior", and "mKulunkulu", all of which may be translated "The Great Great", suggestive of elevated rank, have been used. But again it is observed that there is not on the part of the native any awareness of a vital relationship with this God, nor is there any effort to invoke or placate Him. He is "rigidly out of mind unless something happens".⁸

⁵ Frazer, Native Races of Africa and Madagascar. p. 160.

⁶ Eva N. Dye, Bolonge. (Foreign Mission Christian Society, n. p., 1910), p. 44.

⁷ Robert Hamill Nassau, Fetichism in West Africa. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), p. 34.

⁸ Religions of Mission Fields. (Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, n. p., 1905) pp. 6-9.

William B. Hoyt stands practically alone among those whose findings have been investigated in this research project, having found in Liberia and Cape Palmas a God whose attributes of benevolence predominate, who is the giver and dispenser of good only, rarely, if ever, dispensing retributive justice. He is an intelligent personal Being who can counteract evil designs and who is ever accessible to those who need Him.⁹ One suspects that Hoyt has in some measure confused the native conception of one Supreme Being who is exalted above all others and that of the "powers" which are called by different names, and which are ever present in the world, but who are not credited with the giving of life. The Supreme God, it would appear, is not worshipped, nor is He directly accessible. He is simply "believed in" and in some vague sense "counted on".

Perhaps it would not be correct to say that the African in general ascribes to God a transcendent quality even. He is hardly conceived of as a God before whose awful manifestations of power one stands in speechless awe, or who is so ineffably glorious that mere man dares not approach Him, who deigns not to turn His resplendent countenance toward the sinful face of man. The fact seems to be that the African in general seems hardly to think of this God at all, and when he does, his conception of Him is vague.

⁹ William B. Hoyt, Liberia and Cape Palmas. (Hartford, Connecticut: Case, Tiffany, and Company, 1852), pp. 155, 156.

It is to African belief in general that reference is made in the preceding paragraphs. But when one turns his attention to West Africa, where Voodoo took its rise, one finds a clearer conception of what God is and does. Among the Dahomeans may be heard many myths concerning the Sky-God, who has ultimate control over the universe. When spoken of in this capacity He is usually called Mawu. But sometimes the hyphenated word Mawu-Lisa is heard, Mawu being a female and Lisa a male; the former ruling the moon, the latter the sun. Other accounts are that Mawu is androgynous, and that Lisa is the son of Mawu. Again Mawu is thought of as being two beings in one. The word "Mawu" is said to mean "body-divided".¹⁰

Mr. Ojike, speaking specifically for Nigeria, where Dahomean culture continues to dominate, and where Voodoo has shown greatest imperviousness to external influence, writes:

Broadly speaking there are two related concepts of God, Cheneke and Chi. The first idea is the Supreme Being, God the Creator, the Universal God. He is the same for all persons, races, and nations. He has no angels or holy messengers because He needs none. He can do everything. He created the whole cosmos without fatigue. He is not human and does not possess an animal nature that would need food and drink. . . No one has seen Him physically, and no artist dares portray Him in wood, bronze, or painting. He is a spirit and communicates to no man bodily but in spirit.¹¹

¹⁰ Herskovits, op. cit., p. 11.

¹¹ Mbonu Ojike, My Africa. (New York: The John Day Company, 1926), p. 183.

The idea of God represented under the name Chi relates to spirits in general.

The results of this investigator's inquiry into religious beliefs of Haitian peasants, among whom he lived for nearly two years, corroborates at least in part the findings of Mr. Ojike. The Supreme God of Voodoo, who is frequently identified in Haiti with the God of the Christians, is completely inaccessible. No magic has any influence on Him. He has no temple and can be neither adored nor blasphemed. He cannot be represented at all. Real idolatry does not exist, therefore, for no creature receives the cult of the supreme God.

It is to be remembered that in Haiti, Voodoo belief has undergone Christian influence, without loss, one might say, to Voodoo, the Christian accretions only further complicating the already complex assemblage of beliefs. While an estimated ninety per cent of Haitians still practice the Voodoo cult either openly or clandestinely, there is hardly a region in the country where Christian ideas have not penetrated, among the few possible exceptions being the "mornes" of Cahos, the region of Anse Rouge, and that which lies between Jean Rabel and Port-de-Paix. In the towns and more populous "habitations" Christian ideas have been diffused. The Haitian peasant who knows no respite from the unrelenting struggle against a harsh environment, and no relief from the exploitation of his élite brothers, has arrived at a

concept of divine justice which is held by multitudes of Christians in many lands. In patient submission to a lot which he is powerless to change, and which he attributes in large part not to nature or fate but to immoral man, he is often heard to sigh "Bon Die' bon" (God is good). By this he does not intend to suggest that God is good in the sense of being kind or benevolent. He alludes only to retributive justice which God in His own good time will exercise. This typically Haitian concept cannot be taken as normative for Voodoo everywhere.¹²

III. GOD AS CREATOR

Brief reference has been made already to God as creator of the universe.¹³ This fundamental concept must now be examined more carefully. Throughout Africa, where careful inquiry has been attempted, there has been found belief in a Being to whom is attributed all creation. According to Ojike, this Being is called in Nigeria Chineke, which means "God the Creator". In other parts of Africa He is known by other names such as Olisa, Liza, Allah, Osebuluwa,

¹² Dr. Walter M. Horton remarks that this conception of divine justice found among Haitian peasants appears to be more Old Testament or Stoic than fully Christian.

¹³ It probably reflects the teachings of certain Protestant sects which are found everywhere in Haiti, which emphasize the idea of God as a Righteous Judge.

¹³ Cf. ante., p. 6.

and Eke.¹⁴ The Zulus know a creator God whom they call Zambe, meaning "He-Who-Created-Us".¹⁵ The Fang, like other tribes of West Africa, conceive of a God who made heaven and earth, and also created man. The only fixed idea they have of God is that He created all things. There seems to be no conception of the eternity of God. However, there does seem to be an effort on the part of the Fang mind to find its way back to a First Cause. Having accepted the principle of causality, the Fang "theologian" experiences the necessity of accounting for the existence of God also. But apparently realizing the futility of reasoning further in terms of causation, he gives to God a father and mother and rests there.¹⁶ The Goulah of West Africa call their Creator-God Deah, and the Dey tribes of Gueah allude to Him as Bagaveleh. He is creator of the world but has left its government to lesser deities, exercising no particular providence except on special appeal. For just what kind of favor this God of supreme dignity and power may be approached, and through what means He may be invoked, we are not told.¹⁷

There is prevalent among the Ugandas the belief that in

¹⁴ Ojike, op. cit., p. 180.

¹⁵ William Douglass Mackenzie, South Africa. (Chicago: American Literary and Musical Association, 1899), p. 60.

¹⁶ Robert H. Miligan, The Jungle Folk of Africa. (London: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1908), p. 249.

¹⁷ Hoyt, op. cit., pp. 155, 156.

the far, distant past, God created the universe. But men became so wicked that God became angry and refused to have more to do with His creatures. The nature of this sin, so odious as to alienate the affection of God is not described for us. It may be that this legend, which has survived in so hazy a form in Uganda tradition, explains the remoteness of God in the thought pattern of other tribes.¹⁸

A West African native minister, the Reverend Ibia j'Ikenge, states that his forefathers were primitive monotheists, believing in a God who created all things and governed the world through lesser beings. In emergencies the great God could be invoked. As to the creation of man, there is, among other legends, the one that long, long ago two eggs fell from heaven and broke, one becoming a man the other a woman.¹⁹

Maximilien, citing Leo Frobenius, gives the following account of how the Africans conceived of God in action in creating the world. It is a myth related by an old man named Nganga of the territory of Mpiras:

The God Moari made a man (the moon) named Mwuetsi on the bottom of a lake and gave to him a horn of oil. Mwuetsi expressed the desire to go and live on the earth. Moari advised him against it, but he insisted. He left the lake and went to the earth. The earth was then hot and empty. There was no grass. There were no bushes. There were no trees. There were no animals. Mwuetsi wept and said to

¹⁸Sophia Lyon Fahs, Uganda's White Man at Work. (New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1907), p. 11.

¹⁹Nassau, op. cit., p. 40.

Moari, "How can I live here?" Moari said, "I told you so in advance. You have chosen a road at the end of which you will die." Again Moari said, "But I wish to give it to whom it belongs." Moari gave Mwuetsi a young girl named Nassassi (Morning Star). Moari gave to Nassassi the means for making a fire. Mwuetsi went with Nassassi in the evening into a cave. Mwuetsi said to Nassassi, "I am going to pass (through the fire) from one side to the other. Mwuetsi approached the young girl Nassassi. Mwuetsi touched his finger to the ointment and anointed the body of Nassassi. Then Mwuetsi returned to his couch and fell asleep.

When Mwuetsi awoke the next morning, he looked at Nassassi. Mwuetsi saw that the body of Nassassi was swollen. When day broke Nassassi went into confinement. Nassassi gave birth to grass. Nassassi gave birth to bushes. Nassassi gave birth to trees. Nassassi did not cease to bear until the earth was covered with grass, with bushes, and with trees.

Then the trees grew, grew, grew until their tops touched the sky. And when the tops of the trees touched the sky, the sky began to weep.

Moari took Nassassi from the earth. Moari sent Mwuetsi another wife named Morongo. Mwuetsi took the horn and was about to moisten his finger with the oil. But Morongo said, "Do not do that, I am not like Nassassi. Rub your abdomen with ngona oil." Mwuetsi rubbed his abdomen with ngona oil. Mwuetsi rubbed the abdomen of Morongo with ngona oil. Morongo said, "Now, join yourself to me." Mwuetsi joined himself to Moronga. Mwuetsi fell asleep.

The next morning Mwuetsi awoke. Mwuetsi saw that the body of Morongo was swollen. At dawn Morongo went into confinement. Morongo gave birth the first day to chickens, sheep, and goats, the second day an antelope and exen, the third day boys; then girls. The evening of the fifth day Mwuetsi wanted to have sexual intercourse with Morongo. But Morongo said, "See, the girls are marriageable. Join yourself to the girls in intercourse." Mwuetsi saw the girls. He saw that they were beautiful girls and that they were marriageable. He joined himself to them in sexual intercourse. They gave birth to children. The children born in the morning became men in the

evening. Mwuetsi became the mambo (king) of a great people.

But Morongo had sexual intercourse with the serpent. She no longer produced offspring. She went and lived with the serpent.

After an omission, Maximilien continues the myth:

When the serpent had bitten him, Mwuetsi fell ill. The next day there was no rain. The grass withered. The rivers of the dswoa (lakes) dried up. The animals died. The men began to die. The earth was cursed because of man's sin.

Maximilien thinks that this myth gives a clear glimpse of the theory of creation held by Africans in general. According to it the Word created the Demiurge from whom creation proceeded biologically as in Egyptian belief.

This myth has been given here because Maximilien attempts to draw a parallel between it and the myths of the Creation and Fall in the early chapters of Genesis and the Logos theory of the Gospel of John. The myth, found by Frobenius in Africa, does remind one of the text of Genesis. After having had relations with the serpent Eve continues to bear children, but in sorrow, while in the African myth the woman is struck with sterility. Sin entered the world through the deception of the woman by the serpent in both accounts, and in both the earth is cursed as a consequence. Maximilien would like to show that the ancient African myth contains the idea of the Logos as the agent in creation. But such a proposition does not seem easily deduced. The Genesis story holds out the hope of salvation, which is not

contained in the African myth. After being bitten by the serpent, Mwuetsi becomes sick, and no more is known of him. But Eve's seed shall bruise the serpent's head.²⁰

This legend, discovered somewhere in Africa, and believed to be of Egyptian origin, may or may not have greatly influenced Voodoo ideas of creation. A more legitimate Voodoo legend is given by Herskovits. In Dahomey it is found that Mawu created, but that other beings are co-eternal with him (or her, for this god is sometimes thought to be male, sometimes female) Mawu, after creating the universe, partitioned it among his offspring, giving each complete autonomy in his domain. Hierarchies of gods resulted from the progeny of Mawu, that is to say, to his sons sons. To each of these certain powers were distributed. Groups of deities formed pantheons, each of which had a pantheon head. No one god alone performed all the functions of all nor of any one of the elements. Each had his particular sphere. This hierarchy of divinities represents, according to Herskovits, the true Voodoo belief.

Regular sects have grown up around various of these innumerable divinities, which differ as markedly one from another as do our religious sects in America. Professors of all sects acknowledge the supremacy of Mawu, and they do not deny the validity of each other's belief, although they may not be

²⁰ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 8-14.

familiar with them in any detailed fashion.

No explanation is given as to the method of creation, such conjecture perhaps being thought useless; for Mawu did not reveal even to his (or her) sons the formula for the creation of matter and spirit. Should all things be destroyed Mawu and Mawu alone could create anew.

Variations of the myth just related exist in Dahomey.²¹

In Haiti the distribution of gifts and powers among the gods has survived. To these African deities have been added several Catholic saints. The Catholic God has been placed at the head of the pantheon.

IV. GOD IN NATURE

While every African tribe has its own beliefs and ritual, all are found to have common elements. Under the one supreme Creator-God there is believed to exist a multitude of lesser spiritual beings, some of whom control directly the various aspects of nature, such as storms, lightning, the sea, and the sky.²² Other deities have the power to inflict disease and ill fortune and must be placated. The alteration of the course of natural events, the ability to induce rain during a drought occurring out of season, protection during a voyage at sea, the restoration of health after illness, and the

²¹ Herskovits, op. cit., pp. 10-14.

²² Leyburn, op. cit., p. 137.

warding off of evil, are believed to be possible through the use of charms and magic. The gods render fertile or sterile the earth, they dispense rain or provoke drought. They make the seeds to grow or destroy them. They guarantee the harvests or ruin them.²³

The earth is holy, serving as an offering to the gods, and providing remedies for human ills. The earth is not the abode of infernal spirits,²⁴ their residence being beneath the earth. But bent upon maleficent deeds, spirits of evil frequent the abode of men, and must be either driven off or placated. Spirits, good and evil, continue to interfere with the normal operation of the world. To the voodooist all cause is attributed to some spirit being. There is no natural cause, no natural law. All is supernatural. All phenomena is inscrutable, and no investigation of nature and her laws is attempted. The most common phenomenon, such as the falling of a tree, partakes of the nature of miracle.²⁵

Ideas of cosmology are necessarily primitive in Voodoo. Observable order in the universe excites no thought of natural law. There are no teeming worlds in the African universe. In Voodoo there is no conception of a revolving globe. In Haiti one often hears the Créole pronouncement of one of the

²³ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 69.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁵ Milligan, op. cit., p. 256.

many nature mysteries, such as "Soleil levé nan l'est, li couché nan Guinea". (The sun rises in the East, it sets in Africa). Guinea is the only name the Haitian Peasant knows for Africa. Souls of deceased ancestors are sometimes believed to return to Africa.²⁶

V. GOD IN THE LIFE OF MAN

In the light of what has been said concerning the conception of God as a supreme Creator Being in Voodoo, one is likely to draw the conclusion that God takes no interest in the world that He has made; that He looks down with indifference, if indeed He looks down at all, upon His creatures, and does not interfere in the affairs of men.

But the Voodoo world teems with spirit beings, which affect every event and aspect of life, and which control the destinies of men. Theirs are derived powers for these spirits come from God, and according to Dahomean tradition, are generated rather than created. To this multiplicity of uncreate beings are added the spirits of ancestors, making a veritable "innumerable company" of divine beings.

That these divinities are generally conceived as acting independently, is probably due to the vagueness of the Voodoo conception which makes little effort to link the intimately known deities with the supreme God.

²⁶ Seabrook, op. cit., p. 35.

Maximilien writes:

The numerous divinities which figure so prominently in Voodoo belief and practice may not rightly be classified under the heading the Voodoo God. These divinities are variously known as loas (kings), angels, and mysteries.

Loa seems to be the proper name, while angel is used only to distinguish the human soul from the spirit of a divinity, the guardian angel or angelic spirit protector. Mystery is used above all during a ceremony. For example the voodooist will say currently "Call the loa out of the jar". . . . But one will always during a ceremony, "Salute the mysteries". These spirits are but intermediaries between God and man. Through them God is made immanent. The nuances have been free, and the terms used interchangeably and indifferently in current practice. It may be noted that similar ceremonies were known among the Egyptians and Greeks under the name of mysteries, which signified "things holy, glorious, profitable".²⁷

These superhuman agents are always active in the lives of human beings. The Voodoo devotee is never a fatalist. He struggles constantly to advance, often against formidable odds. Slaves have been known to save money and redeem themselves. Tyrannical rulers have been put down by common citizens. The gods can always be counted upon to aid in any worthy cause or enterprise.²⁸

In Haiti the success of Toussaint L'Ouverture's rebellion, culminating in Haitian independence in 1804, is attributed to the aid of the "loas". L'Ouverture, himself a nominal Catholic, offered Voodoo sacrifices before every battle.

²⁷ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 31, 32.

²⁸ Ojike, op. cit., p. 184.

This explains the tradition which has current countenance in Haiti that whenever a man has been successful in politics, he must pay at least occasional respect to the loas, even though he be a practicing Christian. It is still believed that certain loas take special interest in fostering political fortune, and even the élite who attains high political office is reported to worship clandestinely at the altar of Ogun (ancient Nigerian god of war). Since Haiti has passed from the stage of bloody revolutions, Ogun seems to have become the patron of politicians.

In Nigeria there is the concept of the Chi, an indwelling spirit who is constant companion and guide to man. There are as many Chi as there are human personalities, and all are different because no two human personalities are alike. The Chi of a rich man will be rich, that of a poor man poor. The Chi grows with the individual. A baby's Chi is represented as a baby, that of an adult as an adult. The Chi is always of the same sex as the individual of whom it is, in a sense, the counterpart. The Chi remains with the individual until death.²⁹

The Chi, which is called loa in Haitian Créole, is generally thought of as a family god in Haiti. This deity enters into and "possesses" each individual member of the family at the time of initiation into the cult.

²⁹ Ojike, op. cit., p. 183.

A man's relationship with this spirit may be direct. He may commune with it without the intervention of a priest. This is not merely a spiritual experience. It is in no sense philosophical. The relation is physical and real.³⁰

Once initiated the voodooist is "possessed" or "mounted" by his god, becoming truly his servant and remaining under his guidance until death.

In Haiti the process by which one becomes possessed by a god is called "gagné loa", which means "to get or have a god or spirit". The process resembles in some respects the conversion of the hysterical camp-meeting type once well known in America, although somewhat more prolonged and extreme. In Haiti this experience has been known to transform completely an individual, who thenceforth took on the characteristics of the god who had possessed him. In a very true sense the Voodoo adept can say, "It is no longer I, but the Spirit that dwelleth in me."

These spirits protect their servants against evil spirits, which are invisible but constantly present, and against magicians and evil men. "Nothing is more comforting than to be a Voodooist," writes Maximilien, "even beyond the tomb one's soul is freed to accomplish its supraterrrestrial destiny--even to eternal blessedness."³¹

³⁰ Courlander, op. cit., p. 15.

³¹ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 69.

The foregoing representation of how God becomes immanent in the life of man is probably true for Africans in general. Certain slight variations have been discovered. For example, Sir James George Frazer found among the Baganda of Central Africa belief in a god of Lake Nyanza, who sometimes took up his abode in a man or woman. This incarnate god was greatly feared and frequently consulted as an oracle.³² African chiefs have sometimes declared themselves to be divinities incarnate. The Barango of the Zambesi consider their chief a god, and believing that he hears all they say, fear to speak evil at any time.³³

Similar ideas have been preserved to some degree in Haitian Voodoo, where each divinity represents a tribe or nation. The high priest of Voodoo has the rank of king (the African word mambo used in Haiti means king), while houngan (Voodoo priest) contains the idea of chief.³⁴

The many gods and goddesses invoked in Voodoo cannot be mentioned here, nor even the principal ones. One, however, deserves special notice. He is Legba, who is interlocutor between God and man, and is therefore more frequently invoked than any other. Legba is native to Dahomey. He is one of

³² James George Frazer, The Golden Bough. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928), p. 90.

³³ James George Frazer, Aftermath Supplement to the Golden Bough. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937), p. 117.

³⁴ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 48.

the most ancient and best known of Voodoo gods, and his name is still heard frequently in modern Dahomey. This deity represented as an old man, lame, ragged, and unhand- some, is the powerful guardian of all doors, gateways, cross- roads, and highways. He must be invoked and his permission secured before any Voodoo ceremony can begin. In Haiti he is addressed affectionately as "papa", and invariably at the beginning of the cult the priest is heard to address him in Créole, "Papa Legba, ouvri' barrié pou' nous". ("Papa Legba, open the gate for us.")³⁵

This, then, is the way of God with men as conceived in Voodoo. The Voodooist is profoundly sincere in this belief. The most militant Catholic efforts over a period of more than 250 years have not been able to uproot it.

VI. GOOD AND EVIL IN THE WORLD •

Vodun does not conceive life as a struggle between good and evil. Its conception of spirits is anthropomorphic. No man is wholly good nor wholly evil, nor is any god. Human beings can generally be persuaded into any mood, and so can the gods. As there is variety in human personality, so likewise the gods are not immutable. Some are more to be feared than others, some may be regarded with tender affection, but all are capable of working both weal and woe. A gentle spirit may cause harm to a person who neglects his commands, while a spirit whose power makes possible the most malignant magic may bring good fortune to his devotee. By conceiving his spirits as in manner and desires resembling himself, the Haitian can understand his little universe without

³⁵ Leyburn, op. cit., pp. 146, 147.

subjecting himself to the bewilderment which faces a simple Christian trying to reconcile an all-loving Father with the obvious evil He allows on earth.³⁶

This statement from Dr. Leyburn's book "The Haitian People" describing the Voodoo conception of good and evil, seems to be somewhat cursory and inadequate. On the local Haitian scene where, due to the diffusion of Christian ideas, genuine Voodoo beliefs are difficult to isolate, one finds practically everywhere some kind of differentiation between good and evil spirits. There are, on the one hand, the unknown, active, evil spirits, which are frequently sold by one magician to another. These are sometimes thought of as being the spirits of deceased ancestors who were ill-treated by relatives in this life, or who were not given proper burial, or who were otherwise neglected. These spirits are not to be confused with the "loas", or benevolent spirits. Black Magic is to be found, by means of which malevolent spirits are employed to do harm. In the Pétro rite, which originated in Haiti, and is not of African origin, and therefore is not true Voodoo, two altars are used. One contains a govi (earthen jar) in which is contained the evil spirit. The other altar is for whatever other deity is to be invoked.

To go again beyond Haiti to West Africa, one finds prevalent the belief that in the beginning there was no evil in the world. Such natural evils as pestilence, hurricane, and

³⁶ Leyburn, op. cit., pp. 144, 145.

flood were unknown; famine, accident, and death were unheard of. There was no struggle for existence. Evil entered the world as a result of the violation of a community code by a woman. Instead of sitting down to prepare her evening meal as women were wont to do, she held in contempt the time-honored custom; with temerity she stood up to beat the corn. Her wooden pestle pierced the heavens, and out poured disease and sin and death and all other evils that have since plagued men on earth. Hate and murder and war entered the habitation of men. Life became a struggle and has remained so ever since.

The African does not attribute to God these natural evils. He ascribes them to subordinate evil beings. In Nigeria one evil spirit called Ekwensu stands out more importantly than the rest,³⁷ and seems to correspond to the idea of the devil in traditional Christian belief. But there is no suggestion of his being an apostate son of God.

The woman who pierced the sky with her pestle may be the same woman who introduced sin into the world by eating an apple. The moral in both stories is that transgression, in the one instance of a direct command given by God, in the other of a time-honored community custom, brought upon man all the evils he has known. There is no suggestion that Ekuensu beguiled the Nigerian housewife as Satan did

³⁷ Ojike, op. cit., p. 185.

fair Eve.

The Voodoo motive for devising such an explanation of the existence of evil was probably the same which gave rise to a demonology in the Old Testament. In early Semitic religion God was conceived as the prime mover of all events that could not be attributed to the activity of man. But with the increasing spiritualization and ethicization of the concept of God, it came to be thought that occurrences of an evil or immoral nature were not to be attributed to Yahweh. In intertestamental writings kingdoms of demons appear who oppose the reign of God. One chief end of the coming Messiah was to dethrone the king of demons and to destroy forever his power.

In Voodoo belief there is no knowledge of the power of evil having been overthrown as the New Testament teaches to have been accomplished with the coming of Christ. The Voodooist meets this problem with what is perhaps wrongly called "devil worship". God alone is benevolent, and even He is not worshipped directly. But the devil is malevolent, and his wrath must be appeased or his favor won. Therefore sacrifices are offered to him to placate him, and charms are employed to ward off the evil consequences of his disfavor.³⁸

VII. THE CHRISTIAN GOD IN HAITIAN VODOO

³⁸ Hoyt, op. cit., p. 158.

Reference has been made already to the wide diffusion of Christian influence in Haiti. Most Haitians in the cities and villages are nominally Catholic. But even among those who do not profess the Christian faith, the Christian God is believed in. Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are acknowledged also. A select number of Catholic saints have been adopted into Voodoo. The Virgin Mary is everywhere adored and is sometimes identified with the Dahomean goddess Erzulie, who has no special function, but is simply adored. Damballah the bringer of rain is associated with Saint Patrick and sometimes with Moses.³⁹

Before beginning any service the Voodoo priest addresses a prayer to the God of the Christians, asking His permission to proceed with the service. This prayer is terminated in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Apparently the divine permission asked is never denied; for the houngan invariably proceeds to the invocation of Legba, the gate-keeper.

To the credit of the Haitian Voodooist it must be said that he has placed the God of the Christians at the head of the pantheon. He is thought to be more powerful than any other deity. No houngan or mambo will attempt to cure any sickness believed to have been sent by the Christian God. No sorcerer will direct his magic against any person believed to

³⁹ Leyburn, op. cit., pp. 147, 148.

have the Spirit of the Christian God in him.

In the initiation of Brûler-Zin prayers to God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and sometimes to the Blessed Virgin are made. These are mostly in French rather than Créole, and although sometimes lacking in coherence, have obviously been copied from prayers heard in the Catholic Church.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 99.

CHAPTER III

THE VODOO DOCTRINE OF MAN, SIN, AND SALVATION

I. THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN NATURE

Certain students of primitive religions find in them no real distinction between spirit and matter, the difference being largely one of degree or grade rather than of essence. At the top are those beings which can work without matter, the gods. Below this grade are to be found the multitude of spirits which are associated habitually with matter, as in the case of human beings.¹

The supernatural scene is one of infinite variegation. Objects, inanimate as well as animate, are often thought to be alive with souls or spirits. Human beings are sometimes deified while they live, and deceased ancestors are worshipped as gods. But over against the deification of men and animals and inanimate objects of nature, a constant humanizing of the gods goes on, so that any real distinction between god and man and between man and nature all but vanishes.

What man is, whence he came, and whither he goes remain questions of supreme importance for theology. Voodoo, like other primitive religions, has not come to serious philosophical grips with this question as have the more highly

¹ See Mary H. Kingsley, West Africa Studies. (London: The Macmillan Company, Ltd., 1899), p. 129.

developed religions. Perhaps the most formalized attitude found in Voodoo toward any aspect of human nature relates to the after-life, is bound up with belief in the power of survival after death, and results in the careful cult of the dead and in ancestor worship. Apart from this aspect of the problem, the nature of man as conceived in Voodoo must be inferred from how man is regarded in relation to nature, in relation to society, and in relation to the gods.

A. NATURE AND HUMAN NATURE

Perhaps it might be said that there exists the general attitude that the relation between man and nature is organic and vital. Man is never a "pilgrim and a stranger" on earth. He belongs. Therefore, he can never think meanly of the world around him, as for instance, in Manichaeism which conceives matter as evil.² Of physical evil in the world--of drought and famine and storm and disease and death--there is abundance. But no distinction is made as to cause between physical evil and moral evil, between the drought that destroys the seed and the enemy tribe that ravages the grain fields. The former no less than the latter is the result of malevolent spirits whose evil influence impinges externally upon the will of man or the forces of nature, or to the activity of erstwhile benevolent spirits who have been too long

² Noss, op. cit., p. 3.

neglected. In the Voodoo world of spirits where in some instances primitive animism still survives, where spirits lurk and hide in tree and rock and stream, little or no distinction is sometimes detected between the animate and the inanimate. But, although nowhere stated philosophically, there is a dualism in all things. The most unsophisticated primitive mind knows that a thunder-stone is a stone which like any other stone can be hurled at a bird. But it may at the same time contain mana and possess occult power.³

Man also is constituted of two original and independent elements. The spirit life is a flux of imperishable essence of whose fluid manifestations the body is but a vessel. But what is the substance of the soul of man? This is obscure. But in Voodoo, as in primitive religion generally, it is sometimes identified with the shadow, the breath,⁴ the heart, and bears some kind of relation to dreams and trances.⁵

³ See Henry Nelson Wieman and Walter Marshall Horton, The Growth of Religion. (New York: Willett, Clark and Company, 1938), p. 9. Citing opinion of Herbert Spencer.

⁴ Mbonu Ojike of Nigeria writes, "We believe that man is different from lower animals only in one primary sense; God left in every man a portion of his breath. When this element leaves the edifice called man, the residue is mere matter. From this belief we derive our idea of personal gods, called Chi in the Ibo language." (Ojike, op. cit., p. 183).

Similar concepts are to be found in certain early religions, such as primitive Judaism (Genesis 2:7) and Roman religion of the first century B. C. (Virgil's Aeneid 4: 685).

⁵ See Wieman and Horton, op. cit., p. 9.

Whatever is found to be characteristic of primitive religion in general is of interest to the student of Voodoo. And especially is this true of any religious belief put forward as being general to the Dahomeans, for Voodoo is native to Dahomey. Certain findings of Herskovits are worthy of mention in this connection. According to him the Dahomeans believe that all human beings have three souls. First, there is that of an ancestor who wishes his name to be perpetuated, and who goes out himself to find clay to mould a new body. Then there is the personal soul, the vital life-principle which is responsible for and which makes possible thinking, willing, etc. And finally there is that part of man which has taught him to dominate the earth, making him lord of all lesser creatures.⁶ While judgment on the validity of this three-fold distinction in man as prevailing throughout Dahomey and including the Voodoo cult must be held in abeyance pending more extensive investigation, it may be stated that such a trichotomy (or quadrifid, three souls and a body) is not characteristic of current Haitian Voodoo. Certainly all persons are not believed to be reincarnations of favorite ancestors, and it hardly seems plausible to credit the Voodooist with the subtle differentiation of the cognitive and volitional faculties from that which he believes to be responsible for his powers of dominance over earthly creatures.

⁶ Herskovits, op. cit., p. 50.

B. HUMAN NATURE AND SOCIETY

The life of the Voodoo adept is much conditioned by society. While his religion is practiced as a personal cult, it cannot be taken apart from the life of the whole group. Religion and social custom are inextricably interwoven. The concept of sin in Voodoo appears at first glance to be hardly religious at all, but purely social. Individual acts, other than neglect of the gods and of the dead, appear not to affect a man's personal relations with the gods. But acts of offense against the group are religious in that religion establishes the reason for the social ideal. The aim of religion is to control life in such a way that good will prevail for the whole group. Stealing may not be thought of as transgression of divine law, but it is contrary to the general social aim, namely that every man is entitled to the possession and use of his own property. To deprive another of property is to fail to act in accordance with what is good for the group.

Sanction of the group means sanction of the gods. In violating a law of society one runs counter to the divine will that gave the laws. But the everyday gods of Voodoo are as capricious as the ancient Greek and Roman deities, and the idea of absolute good and absolute evil are altogether alien to them. Herskovits correctly observes that "A man's vodu are not symbols of absolute good and absolute evil. . . . They have rewards and punishments but can be placated by

offerings."⁷ Hence the absence of an absolute ethic in Voodoo.

What a man may be conceived to be morally must always be in relation to the group. Moral excellence consists in acting in accordance with the highest social values. An independent ethic does not exist. Mbonu Ojike, writing of Nigerian religion, which is closely related to Voodoo, emphasizes the importance of this group ethic and of religion as an instrument of social control. There is a Nigerian word "ana" which means "earth". From this word derives "omenana" meaning earth, tradition, law, religion, etc., conceived as a gift from God. By extension the word means "the general welfare" as identical with divine order.

Ojike writes:

Its (omenana) element of mysticism is the secret of the hold it has on our society. It is reverence and fear of the unknown, the everpresent, the all-powerful, that motivates man to be law abiding, loving, and brotherly. . . Destroy this ingenious channel of social control and you have severed the religious fibers that bind man to man in families, societies, and nations.⁸

Concerning Voodoo in Haiti Dr. Louis Maximilien has this to say:

Voodoo falls in the tradition of the great religions presenting a spiritual discipline capable of directing the evolution of man by teaching him to divest himself of self-interest through understanding and love of his neighbor, which will lead him

⁷ Herskovits, op. cit., p. 93.

⁸ Ojike, op. cit., p. 182.

finally to the serenity of the great wisdom which approaches that of God.⁹

Maximilien, who is always solicitous of the evolution of his people, perhaps shows a tendency here to romanticize Voodoo a little too much, presenting a picture of it which might be difficult to justify pragmatically. However, whether the Voodooist becomes "divested of self-interest through understanding and love of his neighbor" or not, it can be established that the Voodoo cult does present a measure of group solidarity which provides benefits for the faithful and imposes severe sanctions upon those who violate the social code.

The Haitian peasant has gone on living in a primitive or semi-primitive state within the framework of a civilization of a higher order, whose laws have never been given full religious sanction. The old tribal law has been superseded by the statute law of the Republic, hence there is no longer identification of law with religion. The result is that many persons, not formally initiated into the cult, acknowledge only theoretically the authority of the traditional group ethic. For these persons the social sanctions of religion have disappeared. Yet they have not made the difficult transition from tribal custom to civil law. For these reasons and perhaps others, the Haitian's religious beliefs have not

⁹ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 78.

always led to a well ordered life.

C. HUMAN NATURE IN RELATION TO GOD

It has been pointed out that Voodoo does not regard man as being all that matters in the universe, as the highest manifestation of cosmic energy.¹⁰ There is no place in Voodoo for pure humanism. It has been noted on the other hand that if man is not "master of his fate and captain of his soul" neither is he a helpless piece on the checker-board of impersonal fate. There is no place in Voodoo for fatalism. There are powers good and powers evil. But these can be controlled if one knows the proper strategy. Man lives on constant intimate terms with his gods. He conceives vaguely of a God who is "high and lifted up", but this God is most of the time out of mind. In relation to the innumerable deities of the earth and sky, man has a certain dignity. He can come boldly into their presence. He can bargain with them. He may attain at death to a rank equal to theirs.

II. SIN AND SALVATION

Remarks have been made on the social nature of sin in Voodoo with reference to acts of conduct regarded as offenses against the group.¹¹ But what of sin conceived as an

¹⁰ Cf. ante., p. 17.

¹¹ Ibid., pp. 24-26.

influence in the world which transcends social system or custom. For this one must turn to mythology. The making of myths to explain all kinds of things is universal to mankind. Voodoo tradition has its myths to explain how evil, both physical and moral, entered the world. There is the vague tradition of a once happy period and a future time when evil shall pass away and good prevail.

Again one hears of a great village chief who used to warn his people not to eat a certain fruit or they would die. Finally he ate the fruit himself and died. Obviously there is more to the myth than this. It would be remarkable indeed if it had been invented merely to explain the death of one man. One may surmise that in its original form it attempted to explain the consequences to the race of one man's sin.

There is another fable of a woman who brought to her village the fruit of a forbidden tree. In order to hide it she swallowed it, and this was the beginning of witchcraft.¹² Thus witchcraft is given an evil origin. And there is no doubt that it is regarded in Voodoo as a bane and a scourge, more often evil than good. But often no other way is open to deal with the evil that is ever imminent.

These fables have been given but little currency in Voodoo. The fact of sin and evil in the world is accepted with

¹² Nassau, op. cit., p. 40.

little speculative interest as to how they came to be here. But the student of Voodoo wonders about the origin of such folklore. Could these legends be derived from Christian sources? The possibility seems remote. Is there a universal belief that man fell from a state of integrity? Are the polytheistic and magical elements in primitive religion degenerate forms of a once purer religion as Andrew Lang believed?¹³ Voodoo has no answer to these questions. The genesis of things is lost in the mist of an unwritten past. Today Voodoo formulates no theories, asks no questions about life except how to live it.

Man is constantly aware of evil in the world. He is surrounded with malevolent powers. It is frequently necessary to adopt measures to ward off the evil influence of those who would hurt or destroy, and to placate through gifts and sacrifices those who are disposed to bestow benefits. In addition to this, the careful cult of the dead must be exercised and proper burial and ceremony executed to assure immortality and the good will of the deceased beyond the grave. Salvation in Voodoo hardly consists of more than this.

There has been discovered a legend that a "son" of God named Ilongo ja Anyambe was to come to deliver men from trouble and give them happiness. But hope of his coming has long since been abandoned. One finds also the belief that

¹³ Wieman and Horton, op. cit., p. 19.

those who live justly will go at death to a "good place", and others to a "bad place". But there is no definite idea as to what these places are.¹⁴

Back in Dahomey the tradition is said to exist that Mawu sent her favorite son Legba into the world to help man with his wisdom. However, Legba did not offer himself in sacrifice for the salvation of man, but offered his services, largely as a trickster, to help man circumvent fate.¹⁵ In popular Voodoo Legba is guardian of doors and gates, of highways, crossroads, and bridges. He is one of the most ancient and best known of Voodoo gods, and must be invoked at the beginning of every service. But he may in no sense be regarded as a "Savior".

The most prevalent attitude in Voodoo in regard to man's need of salvation seems to be this: that man has been left by his creator to struggle with supernatural forces in the world, that he must in some way come to terms with these powers and win their favor which means protection against evil in this life and immortality with the gods after death. Elaborate ceremonies have been devised to this end. If these means fail, one may still resort to fetish and experimental magic.

III. NOTIONS OF IMMORTALITY

¹⁴ Nassau, op. cit., p. 41.

¹⁵ Herskovits, op. cit., p. 12.

No "doctrine" in Voodoo is more prominent, nor offers better opportunity for objective study than the belief in immortality.

All of life is filled with the rhythm of the Great Being, expressed in the transformation of becoming, dying away, and becoming again. This changing of the being is the content of life. It rules the course of things and of reflections, as seed-time, growth, and harvest. And likewise birth, maturity, old age, and death follow birth, maturity, old age, and death. The rhythm takes the place of eternity. . .¹⁶

Thus writes Maximilien concerning immortality as conceived in Voodoo.

Of such consequence is this aspect of Voodoo belief that a system of elaborate rites for the dead, called "the cult of the Ghédeś" and "Dessounin" developed. Maximilien gives the following descriptions of these rites:

The Ghédeś spirits take their name from an indigenous African tribe, which existed from the beginning of the Dahomean dynasty. Members of this tribe practiced burying their dead after removing the head--a custom which was forbidden in the seventeenth century. As a result of this prohibition frequent fights broke out which made famous the name "Ghédés", applied to the divinities of funeral rites.

The Ghédés came from Africa, but the rites have been gathered from all over the world, representing a universal belief (according to Sir James George Frazer). They resemble the method of the Egyptians who practiced the osirification of royal personages and of the dead. In the resurrection of Osiris the Egyptians saw the pledge of a life eternal beyond the grave for themselves. This Egyptian hope is identical with that of the Africans

¹⁶ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 35.

who practiced exactly analogous rites.

These rites consisted in revitalizing Egyptian kings who had grown old, and who formerly were put to death or forced to commit suicide. To one of the Pharaohs, who had been educated in Greece, this drama was horrible. Rather than submit to death, he had put to the sword the priest whose duty it was to execute this act, and had applied to himself the ritual by which Osiris had been resuscitated by his wife Isis. This process came to have the power to give new vitality to aging kings. Osirification was thereafter applied to royal persons while living and to common people after death. . . . These are the Ghedes rites of Voodoo.

Frazer says that this custom was found in West Africa in the nineteenth century by missionaries. . . .

During the celebration of the rite a priest was carried upon a sled holding himself in the position of a fetus, and wrapped in the skin of an animal just sacrificed. The skin was believed to have the power to revitalize the king and to accord eternal life to the dead. The personage who was put in the skin was called the Tikenou. Today the priest who represents the Tikenou operates under a shroud or an old frock-coat with red frills, and instead of assuming the fetal position, he mimics the act of copulation, to symbolize the generation of new birth, by an erotic dance.

The Ghédés use a penis carved from wood (fifty to sixty centimeters long). This recalls the saying, "Isis found all the parts of Osiris except the genitals, which the fish had eaten, so they made an effigy which (according to Frazer) they use to this day."¹⁷

Dessounin is a ceremony practised at the time of the death of a hounsi-canço [second degree initiate in Voodoo] or a few hours later, but always before burial, unless the houngan [priest] is not available. It is a rite symbolic of the separation of the spirit

¹⁷ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 119-24.

maitre-tête (the god who has possessed the subject during life) from the immortal soul.

The houngan accompanied by his hounsis enter the room where the dead lies. The priest draws on the corpse from head to foot with corn meal a large cross. Candles are lighted and placed in the following places: above the head, below the feet, and on each side of the pelvis. The priest then takes a tuft of hair from the head and a bit of hair from the pubic region and from the armpits. All this he puts in the "head-pot".* The corpse is covered with a white sheet on which is drawn a cross. An egg and leaves from certain trees along with the "head-pot" are placed at the center of the cross. Another cross is drawn [presumably on the floor], and food is placed beside the candles. Wine, water, and other beverages are poured into the "head-pot". The priest then draws the vêver* of the loa (god) of the deceased. He now catches a chicken and offers it some of the corn meal, which it is allowed to peck at only a little. It is then offered to the four cardinal points. The priest then kneels and recites the classical Voodoo prayer. Down is taken from the chicken and placed in the "head-pot". The chicken will not be sacrificed until a few days later at the ceremony of Brûler-Zin.

This done the houngan enters under the sheet with the deceased and places himself astride the stomach. Sounding his açon and bell he invokes all the Radas gods, but especially the loa of the deceased. At this point the priests declare they can feel the establishment of communion between themselves and the dead. The corpse moves its head a little then sinks into inertia again. At this juncture members of the family experience a mild "possession" as the loa passes from the dead to them. The houngan comes out now, collects the food and places it in the "head-pot". The loa has departed and the soul is free.

The soul is now carefully gathered in the "head-pot" wrapped in a towel. The houngan goes out turning round and round as he goes carrying the "head-pot" with him, to be placed in the houmfort [temple]. The Zins (pots of earth or metal in which oil is burned) will be

* The "pot de tête" or head pot is an earthen jar which is supposed to contain the soul of the hounsi-canço withdrawn from his head at the time of initiation. A vêver is the emblem of a god, perhaps a vestige of totemic culture. Cf. Post, p. 62.

burned for the soul fifteen days later. This ceremony is a most important obligation for the family and must be performed, if not at the time of death, then later at the grave. The dead will become terribly dangerous if these rites are neglected.

.....

After the burning of the Zin the "head-pot" will be exposed in an open field and the soul will take refuge in some body of water, salt or fresh, from which it will be withdrawn a year later by the ceremony called "Withdrawal of the Spirit from the Water".

The rite of Dessounin applies only to the initiated. It symbolizes new birth to life eternal.¹⁸

During the year that the soul must sojourn in the water it may appear in the form of an insect such as a bee or a may-bug. After being withdrawn from the water the soul is placed in an earthen jar called a govi and kept in the temple. It has been raised to the level of an angel or god. Is the period which the spirit spends under water a time of purgatory? The Voodooist believes that during this period the soul is in a state of suffering.

The ceremony by which the soul is withdrawn from the water is very similar to the Dessounin. Vêvers are drawn, food and drink are offered, a chicken is sacrificed, and special prayers are offered.

The soul which does not have these benefits becomes a wandering spirit engaged in evil, wreaking vengeance upon the family that neglected it. For it has been robbed of paradise and the beatific life.

¹⁸ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 171-75.

It seems to be fairly generally believed among Haitian adepts that the soul when released goes home to God--the God of the Christians. There is in Voodoo no belief in a bodily resurrection.

The Voodoo religion is a complex system of beliefs, practices, and rituals. It is a blend of African and European influences. The central figure is L'Ogou, the god of war and iron. Other important figures include L'Erzulie, the goddess of love, and L'Azoué, the goddess of justice. The religion is practiced in the form of ceremonies and rituals, often involving the use of music, dance, and offerings. The adepts, or priests, are believed to have the power to communicate with the spirits of the dead and to perform miracles.

The Voodoo religion is a complex system of beliefs, practices, and rituals. It is a blend of African and European influences. The central figure is L'Ogou, the god of war and iron. Other important figures include L'Erzulie, the goddess of love, and L'Azoué, the goddess of justice. The religion is practiced in the form of ceremonies and rituals, often involving the use of music, dance, and offerings. The adepts, or priests, are believed to have the power to communicate with the spirits of the dead and to perform miracles.

The Voodoo religion is a complex system of beliefs, practices, and rituals. It is a blend of African and European influences. The central figure is L'Ogou, the god of war and iron. Other important figures include L'Erzulie, the goddess of love, and L'Azoué, the goddess of justice. The religion is practiced in the form of ceremonies and rituals, often involving the use of music, dance, and offerings. The adepts, or priests, are believed to have the power to communicate with the spirits of the dead and to perform miracles.

CHAPTER IV

THE VOODOO CHURCH AND ITS MEANS OF GRACE

The Voodoo communion with its regularly appointed place of worship, its highly formalized system of worship, its hierarchical government, its clerical and sacerdotal profession, its elaborate rites of initiation, baptism, sacrifice, actions of grace, and carefully wrought out cult of the dead, embraces all the elements essential to the institution of a church.

In spite of the moral and esthetic degeneration which Voodoo has undergone in Haiti, in spite of the degree to which unscrupulous priests use it as an instrument to exploit this most poverty-stricken and exploited of peoples, the Voodoo society continues to provide for its adepts a community of interest in which is found warmth and social solidarity and fellowship with the gods.

The Voodoo cult fosters no purely academic doctrines. The faith which it promotes is no "evidence of things not seen". The Voodooist is not asked to believe without evidence. In the rites of the cult he finds proof of what he is asked to believe. The whole great drama of life and death and life again, magnificent, mysterious, and poignant, is enacted before his eyes with great cogency, as the priest, steeped in centuries of jungle lore, chanting incantations

which he does not himself understand, transports his followers to far away Dahomey, or Guinea, as the Haitian peasant calls Africa, where, in the ecstatic grip of "possession", they become embodiments of ancient ancestral gods.

There is no proselytism in Voodoo designed to attract one to any particular god, or to any god at all, for that matter. There is no formulation of beliefs apart from those made by the social scientists and theorists of alien cultures. To the Voodooist himself the lessons taught through song and dance, through pantomime and symbol, are more efficacious than sermons, and the individual psychological experience of "possession" is more useful than dogma.

Voodoo rites are realistic and have been said to correspond nearly to Jewish ceremonies. In Haiti, Voodoo has become inextricably mixed with Catholicism. The Catholic influence manifests itself in the furnishings of the houmfort or Voodoo temple, as well as in elements of the service. The altar, for example, may contain a crucifix, holy water, and lithographs of the saints, as well as fruits and vegetables and drinks of various kinds. Leyburn describes this as "a perfect marriage between Vodun and Catholicism". In the service, especially if held in town, as services sometimes are, the priest may read from the Catholic Prayer Book. The Pater Noster, the Apostle's Creed, the Ave Maria and other prayers may be read or said, during which the worshippers kneel or stand as they would in the Catholic Church.

Candles and holy water are used, and the sign of the cross is made. However, on careful observation, one sees that the marriage between Voodoo and Catholicism is not so complete; for during all this time a special officiant known as a "prêt savânné" or bush priest, has been in charge, while the houngan (high priest) has sat quietly by, taking no part in the exercises. This part of the service ends with a benediction. The houngan then comes forward to conduct the purely African rites.

I. THE VOODOO TEMPLE

The Voodoo service can be understood only in connection with the temple and its appointments. The temple, called the houmfort, is a simple hut usually of three rooms. In one end is the altar (pé) on which are placed sacred objects and under which may be seen food and drink for the god. Upon the altar are placed also the "govis", sacred vases containing the spirits of the divinities. Beside the govis are placed the "pots de tête" or "head pots", made of white faience, which contain the souls of the hounsis-canço who have been initiated in the house. These may sometimes number twenty or more. Flags are seen on the pé and a crooked machette stuck in the earth near it. Bouquets of artificial flowers adorn the altar, upon which burns perpetually the light of an oil lamp. A saber is stuck in the earth before the altar. In the court of the temple there are other small

buildings in which may be seen smaller and less important altars, on which are placed small wooden chests or trunks, containing little packets. These are perfumed and tied up at the period of the new moon and placed in plates made of faience at the bottom of the trunk. Before the trunk an oil lamp is lighted on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Each trunk contains two packets, one for the use of the houngan, the other for the mambo (priestess). These packets are regarded as talismans and are used for therapeutic purposes.

The temple court is bordered with shrubs which form a "repositoir" or street altar, where the procession stops while making the tour on holy days. This is probably a borrowing from Catholic practice.

Somewhere within the enclosed space are two metal bars driven in the earth, around which a fire is lighted on Tuesdays and Saturdays. This fire is kept burning all during a ceremony. It is the forge of the ancient Dahomean war god Orgoun, called in Haiti Orgoun-Feraille.

The Voodoo service may be elaborated to include special appointments, as is the case during the initiation of the hounsis. But those described above are the basic and stationary elements which anyone may see.

II. ADMINISTRATION OF THE TEMPLE

The Voodoo temple is administered by a president, who is principal assistant to the houngan. He is necessarily

of the grade of hounsi-canzo, coming next after the houngan. There is a secretary, a treasurer, and a laplace. This last is master of ceremonies during the initial unofficial part of the service. He serves also as general assistant to the hounsi-canzo. There is a first confiance, ordinarily a woman, and generally of the rank of mambo, a rank equal to that of the houngan, with whom she collaborates. The second confiance has the grade of hounsi-canzo and bears the title hougue nikon. Her duties are to preside over the dances and direct the choir. There are usually two assistant confiances, four ground police called ministers, three drummers, a hogan-tier, who sounds the sacred "hogan" or gong. There are always several hounsis-canzo, who are servant priestesses.

The temple constitutes a kind of family patrimony, and the priestly powers are transmitted from generation to generation. If a houngan sees that death is imminent he loses no time in designating his successor, a son or daughter, or other member of the family. Whoever is designated is under sacred obligation to accept. If he is not yet a houngan, a houngan is given temporary charge of the house, and the chosen person is appointed to the role of president until he attains the rank of houngan.

III. THE VEVERS

The vêvers constitute essential elements in the ceremonial rites of Voodoo. A vêver is a design drawn on the

ground at the foot of the central pillar in the temple. It is the emblem of the god who is to be invoked. The figures, often highly complicated designs, are drawn with wheat flour, corn meal, ashes, powdered ginger, coffee, or almost any powdered substance which may be available. Holding the substance between thumb and index finger, the houngan or mambo manifests great skill in tracing the complicated design.¹

Of these vêvers, without which no god can be invoked, Maximilien writes:

These emblems represent the vestiges of totemic culture conserved by a people who once knew powerful kingdoms.

.....

They supposedly conserve motifs similar to those which adorned the pentacle of Solomon, and those found in a book written in code and kept by Pope Honorius III. But there seems to be ample evidence that the vêvers have come down, at least in part, from Indian tradition.²

IV. INITIATION OF HOUNSI-CANZO

There are three degrees of initiation in Voodoo. The first degree is that of houngan-bossal which is followed by a period of purification, submission, and obedience. The third degree is that of grand master, in which candidates are raised to the rank of houngan and mambo. These third degree rites have never been witnessed by other than those

¹ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 17-26.

² Ibid., p. 42.

already "made", hence no description of them is possible here. Initiation to the degree of hounsi-canzo, the second degree and the one by which a candidate is made a full-fledged member of the cult, is also secret. The investigator sought opportunity for the better part of two years to witness one of these services in Haiti, but without success. He is indebted in large part to Dr. Louis Maximilien for the description which follows. The degree of hounsi-canzo, complicated and full of detail, signifies death and resurrection. It must be preceded by renunciation of three things: (1) the illusion of self; (2) doubt; and (3) superstition (which here means unreasoning fear of the mysteries).

There is no fixed age for initiation into the Voodoo cult. Usually when one has begun to earn his own living or is able to pay the cost of the ceremony, he may be initiated. These rites have nothing to do with the pubescent initiations practiced in certain primitive religions in which sexual maturity is acknowledged and through which youths and girls are admitted to the society of the adults. The rites are purely religious, and to be initiated is the first great religious duty which enables one to benefit from the protection of the gods and which integrates one into the society of the "saved". Sickness may sometimes be an occasion for initiation into the order so that the stricken may partake of the therapeutic benefits of the cult. Here one may note the difference between genuine Voodoo and witchcraft, the latter being

practiced outside the cult by a witch doctor called a bocor.

One wishing to receive hounsi-canzo goes to the local houngan and indicates his desire to be a member of the cult. The houngan will ask him to undergo a period of probation during which he will be under constant observation, and will familiarize himself with the "work of the house"--ceremonies, songs, dances, etc. After this period, which lasts about two months, the houngan will decide to "raise" him during a ceremony or some bamboche organized for the gods.

For the initiation one enters the temple to be adorned. On the head is worn a red silk handkerchief. Handkerchiefs of various colors are attached to the arms and neck. In his hand the candidate carries a large bouquet of flowers gathered from the field. There may sometimes be a crucifix planted at the center of the bouquet (another Catholic borrowing).

Each aspirant goes out alone and is raised separately. In the courtyard he is placed in an armchair which is surrounded by four ministers. The hounsis sing as they dance around the central pillar and the armchair to the sound of drums. This lasts for perhaps a quarter-hour. Then the houngan takes the hand of the member-elect and leads him to the president of the society, who goes with him into the temple and makes him take oath before the altar on which is the chest and the govis. The neophyte stands before the altar and says "I swear, I swear, I swear to respect the

powers of Guinea, to respect the powers of the houngan, of the president of the society, and of all those to whom powers may be delegated".

Then the president places his hand on the head of the member-elect and says, "You have become a child full of wisdom". He has become a child of Voodoo known as a hounsi-bossal. He now assumes an attitude of submission. He stands in front of the president of the society and salutes him. He then turns around three times. Each time as he comes face to face with the president he stops and half bends his knees in reverence. He then stretches himself on the ground and kisses the earth three times. The president extends his hand and helps him to rise. The initiate turns again, this time passing under the arm of the president. He now goes out and stands under the peristyle, where he salutes the central pillar, four times dashing a little water upon it and kissing the earth beneath it. With these same gestures he salutes the drums, the houngan, and other dignitaries of the cult. After this he is placed again in the armchair and the hounsies do again the rounds and songs. The houngan leads the singing while the hounsies give choral response. The member-elect may at this point manifest mild indications of "possession".

Now the four ministers raise the armchair to the height of their shoulders, raising and lowering it three times. The assembly stands up and acclaims the hounsi-bossal, saying,

"Ah, bobo", and uttering cries of joy. The ministers carry the initiate in triumph around the central pillar in the midst of loud acclamations. The armchair is put down and the hounsi-bossal re-enters the temple. The new hounsi remains for an hour or two before the altar in a state of "possession", then returns to the peristyle to take his place among the other hounsis.

This is the first exaltation. The hounsi-bossal will have to wait some time yet before taking the "master's degree" face to face with the spirits, conferred by the hounsis-canzo.

When ready to proceed to the second degree, the hounsi-bossal presents himself at the temple for instruction. He is sometimes instructed to go to the Catholic Church and pray that his sins may be forgiven in order that he may be in a state of grace. However, he does not confess to the Catholic priest, but returns instead to the houngan and confesses all that he has done of evil during his whole life. He also recounts any acts of virtue which he has performed. The Voodoo priest enters the temple and transmits to the god this confession. He then exhorts the hounsi-bossal to fulfill his duties toward the loas of Guinea.

This initiation prepares for a new life. It is a symbolic death which prepares for the resurrection of a new being stripped of all vanity and ambition, and purified so as to become a vessel worthy of receiving the spirits. Days

of the week are scrupulously observed. Monday and Tuesday are days of rest and meditation. The candidate also goes during these two days to the great baths in river or fountain, where he washes his head with soap, a symbolic act representing the cleanliness of the soul in a state of grace. On the last Tuesday before initiation the houngan or mambo performs a ceremony in honor of Aizan-Velequete, the god exorcist and purifier. The hounsi-bossal may go again to the Catholic church to pray.

The vêver of the god is drawn on the ground, and on it is placed an armchair covered with a white sheet on which palm leaves are spread. All the Radas gods are saluted, and fits of "possession" occur. The hounsis, using thorns, cut or hack the palm leaves into small strips. These will take the name of the god, and will be used as part of the sacrifice.

The member-elect turns around ritually and goes into the temple where there is a bowl filled with water into which has been put certain aromatic leaves. He bathes in this water, anoints his head with oil, and dresses in a white garment, binds his head with a white kerchief, and drapes a white sheet over his head in such a way as to allow only his face to show. He is now ready to lie down on a bed or mat covered with palm and other leaves. A great stone is used for a pillow. A little distance away on another mat are foods cooked and raw, fruits and desserts, wines and liquors, which are to be eaten

and drunk by the new initiates. The houngan attaches to the head of each a handkerchief which contains an egg,³ a piece of bread, and some wine. At this moment the priest salutes the gods and the initiates by clapping his hands three times.

The initiates take to their beds where they remain for four days. This symbolizes death. Each day olive oil is applied to their bodies as a symbol of resurrection. Each evening the houns come to sing under the arbor.

A diet which is largely liquid and without salt is followed. For this an ordinary plate is used. The "plate of Guinea" will be used on the last day. Beside the person on the mat is placed the "head pot", which is made of white crockery. The initiates must not talk to each other, but they may pray. Sometimes a formulary of Catholic prayers is provided. Each one is provided with a bell to summon the confiance if any service is desired.

When the time arrives for the final ceremony, the priest puts meal on the head of the initiate and also in his hands which are raised, palms upward, to the height of his head. Two pigeons are brought forth, and as soon as they have pecked the meal, are sacrificed. This signifies willingness on the part of the initiate to die as a holocaust (which in earlier

³ Dr. Horton remarks that on a visit to Eleusis (where the Eleusinian mysteries were held) he saw many symbols of death and rebirth, among them the dart and the egg. Undoubtedly the egg in Voodoo rites symbolizes potential life as in the Eleusian mysteries.

times he might be called upon to do). Each aspirant presents a fowl which corresponds to the favorite color of the god whom he will serve during the remainder of his life. The priest presents these to the four cardinal points while uttering sacred words. The god Legba is then invoked. (In the most Haitianized form of this ceremony Jesus is invoked through the medium of Legba, and God through the medium of Jesus.) The fowl is then passed over the body of the aspirant and sacrificed. The beak, a pinch of down, and a few drops of blood are put in the "head pot". The priest takes a tuft of hair from the top of the head, and some from the arm pit and the pubic region. This along with some nail clippings are placed in the "head pot", indicating that the soul of the individual has been taken out and is now in the hands of the high priest. Henceforth no magician or evil spirit can harm it. The three fetters of the disciple--illusion of self, doubt, and superstition--have been cast off. The initiate has become one with the spirits. He lives and breathes in them and they in him.

Taking water in a sacred dish the priest makes a ritual washing of the hounsi-bossal's head. Then kneeling, he traces the vêver of the god on the ground, invoking him to come and take possession of the initiate, who is at this moment seized with a fit of "possession" which is attenuated by the priest; for the time is not yet fully come. The head of the initiate is bound and he proceeds to baptism. In the head cloth are

some peanuts, roasted corn, and sweets. Two children--a boy and a girl--are called (being near-by for the purpose) and asked to give the new initiates a name. Ringing his bell the priest calls the loa and tells him that the new initiate has agreed to serve him. The new member is now given food consisting of the sacrificed chicken and white rice. The initiation is complete. The new hounsi-canzo is transfigured. He is seized with a fit of "possession" during which he takes on the characteristics of the god of whom he is now the embodiment.⁴

It should be noted that each initiate has the right to keep his soul at home if he so desires, but as a rule he prefers to leave it in the temple in the keeping of the priest.

Once one has become an adept of Voodoo one is immediately placed in a social frame where he will have the benefit of a large fraternity, of social solidarity which condemns wrong and provides mutual assistance. In Haiti, where hunger is the rule rather than the exception, where actual starvation is possible, membership in the cult may mark the difference between survival and death.

V. POSSESSION

"Possession", which may occur in any ordinary service, is one of the most impressive reactions of Voodoo, in spite of

⁴ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 69-88.

its frequency. The fit or convulsion caused by "possession", called in Haiti "crise de loa", develops under the influence of the idea of a human being becoming possessed by the spirit of a god. According to those who have experienced it, "possession" begins with a sensation of fatigue of the muscles. Lassitude and vertigo follow with a gradual diminution of the superior mental faculties. The individual "seized" feels that his limbs are breaking. He tries to regain equilibrium by hopping backward on one heel and projecting the other foot before him. He may fall if not caught by someone. He then faints, losing consciousness completely, or perhaps not quite completely; for he can remember after the spell a part of what was done and said during the fit, as well as a part of what went before.

When put in tension the entire organism resolves itself into a spasmodic convulsion, a veritable clonus which is comparable to a storm.

Each loa appears in a manifestation peculiar to himself alone. It appears that each loa represents a chapter presided over by a dignitary, in whom the spirit is embodied first at the moment of invocation, and which he transmits to all present of whom this particular spirit is master. Those who have experienced possession say unanimously that after this first experience they feel a considerable weight at the nape of the neck and a feeling of swelling in this region. This sensation passes down to all the members. The

person in process of being possessed, shakes in a jerky fashion at this stage, as though trying to shake off some matter which adheres to his hands. Passing through this initial stage, he rises, straightens, and his gestures become majestic. His countenance lights up, his eyes become bright. He undergoes a complete transformation. He is no longer a servant, but has been raised to the height of a god. The priest bows before him.

The crisis develops in conformity with the attributes of the god which possesses or "mounts" the devotee. For example, one possessed by Agouet, god of the sea and patron of sailors and fishermen, might be seen sitting astride a chair with two pieces of plank in his hands, representing a boat, which he rows with the industry of a galley slave. A man relatively young may be mounted by the aged Legba. His countenance will take on the aspect of age. He will limp, using the crutch of the god. The Péto loas, which are gods of force, would cause a much more violent fit of "possession" than the Radas gods.⁵

Once the crisis has been fully reached, the god manifests the desire to withdraw. The drums salute him; he salutes the drums, then withdraws. Sometimes the possessed cannot come out of the spell, which may last more than two hours. The priest is then obliged to take him into the

⁵ Radas gods are gods of the Andra people of Dahomey. Radas is a Créole corruption of Andra.

temple and with appropriate ceremonies bring him back to a normal state.⁶

Several theories have been suggested to explain "possession". There is the theory that people have, over a period of years, associated certain characteristics of a god or goddess until they have a clearly defined idea of the deity's personality. During a ritual each person is expecting a manifestation of certain spirits. Thus there is built up a thought form centering around one or more gods. In time the group mind develops a "group elemental" which has an individuality of its own and ceases to be dependent upon the concentration and emotion of the crowd that gave it birth. It might be held that the "elemental" so produced lives, is intelligent, and possesses power superior to those who gave it birth.

Another theory is that of the split personality. Due to a lack of cohesion of the psyche, the hidden subconscious personality, which is the repository of individual experience and also the vehicle of the history of the race, rises to the surface and assumes control.⁷

Maximilien, who is a physician, describes "possession" as a nervous phenomenon of the suggestive order, which can be easily induced in a certain category of individuals,

⁶ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 55-58.

⁷ See Steedman, op. cit., pp., 177, 178.

previously prepared in regard to the elements which constitute the content of the fit in relation to the environment. The state is artificially created, he thinks, by autosuggestion and hypnotism. The process of suggestion begins in infancy, the child inheriting an organic predisposition as a result of the phenomenon having been operative through many centuries of his ancestral history. This inherited predisposition, while it would be little noticed between two generations, would become important in the evolution of the race. The hypnotist is not a man but a religious discipline. When a family or personal divinity is saluted his servants cannot help going into a fit of "possession". The mystic thought of the divinity has become completely integrated in his personality. His sensory motor reflexes have been conditioned to form for him a conscience peculiar to his religion. The mystic thought of the god or gods breaks out whenever given the proper stimulus. Such manifestations are so precise that those accustomed to witness them are able to identify without fear of mistake the god in question.⁸

VI. THE SERVICE OF BRULER-ZIN

Following the initiation of hounsi-canzo there is a reception for the new members which is open to the public. After proper preparation the mambo has placed on the floor

⁸ Maximilien, op. cit., pp. 58-60.

of the peristyle a mat covered with a white cloth on which are placed food and aromatic leaves. Three zins or earthen vases, or sometimes two of baked clay, and the third of metal, are erected on tripods in the temple court. The first two will be burned for the living and the dead respectively, the third in honor of Ogoun. The sacrifice of young chickens and the presentation of food of all kinds is made use of at this service. All the hounsis are expected to attend with their families. Visitors are welcomed. The houngan or mambo gives an expression of welcome in the form of a little song, often improvised. The service in general proceeds in a way similar to that of the initiation of the hounsis. But there is much minor detail which is different.

Of special significance is the dance of the "Yamval-loux". This dance represents a man crouching, his legs bent under his thighs, trunk bent over pelvis. The shoulders are raised and lowered alternately with the stretching of the legs, producing a cadence which is executed with great rapidity and grace to the rhythm of the drums. The dance is a prayer in pantomime. Then the chorus announces that one must walk straight if he does not wish to get thorns in his feet, that is to say, practice moral rectitude so as to avoid mishaps. Now the hounsis trip lightly, looking carefully lest they prick their feet with thorns. There are other messages which are thus conveyed in dances, the meanings of which are the secrets of the initiated.

The entire service of Brûler-zin is often one of thanksgiving during which the faithful make offerings to the gods. Sometimes a long list of gods are implored during this ceremony by members of many families. Efforts are made to make up for neglect of sacred obligations. During such a ceremony numerous vevers are drawn which are bound together by one large center circle whose border all the small ones touch. This indicates the unity of the faith, the unbroken fellowship of all the faithful and communion with all the gods.

At the close of the ceremonies all present are served cakes and wine.

Attendance at at least one of these services annually is obligatory on all initiates under penalty of severe sanctions.

VII. SACRIFICES

Blood sacrifices are offered at most but not all ceremonies. At some fruits of the earth are offered. But blood is thought to be more efficacious because blood sustains life. The animal offered must be without blemish and in good health. The beast, frequently a chicken or goat, but sometimes a bull or hog, is killed and its blood caught in a receptacle and placed on the altar. In certain rites the worshippers are sprinkled with the blood of the slain animal, in others some of the blood is sprinkled on the altar. Oil, flour, meal, and other materials are offered at the same time.

SUMMARY

The ancient Dahomean system of religious beliefs and practices called Voodoo from the Ewe word vodu, meaning "god or spirit", is a syncretism of diverse African and non-African strands. It contains metaphysical ideas which may be derived from the religion which flourished in Egypt during the old dynasties of the fourth century B. C. Various African secret societies have probably contributed also to the formation of Voodoo rites.

Voodoo ideas dominated the entire West African region after its subjugation by the powerful Dahomean dynasty in the early part of the eighteenth century. For more than one hundred and fifty years foreigners were carefully excluded from the region and no western ideas were allowed to infiltrate the Voodoo system. It was during the early part of the period of Dahomean conquest of West Africa that Negroes from along the coast were transported to Haiti taking their religious beliefs and practices with them.

In Haiti Voodoo probably assimilated elements from the indigenous culture which it found there. The practice of sacrificing a quail after presenting it to the four cardinal points, and of sprinkling some of its blood on small red flags which are afterwards burned, seems to be derived from Indian sources.

Freemasonry is also believed to have contributed to the

present form of Voodoo in Haiti. The secret initiations, by means of which one comes in possession of the mysteries of the society, proved especially congenial to Voodoo, which had its own secret initiatory rites.

By far the greatest modifying influence upon Haitian Voodoo has been that of Catholic Christianity. God and Jesus, the Holy Virgin, and many other Catholic saints are today worshipped in Voodoo. Catholic prayers and chants are heard in ceremonies of the cult. Lithographs of saints adorn every Voodoo altar. Crucifixes are much in evidence everywhere, and a typical Catholic baptism may be witnessed in a Voodoo chapel. However, in adopting these elements of Catholic belief and practice, Voodoo has not given up any of its own.

Voodoo has been frequently described as a cult of "serpent, sex, and blood". The serpent, which is believed to be in some way related to Damballah, Dahomean god of wealth, has been known to be protected and nourished by Voodoo devotees, but is not essential to the cult. Reliable investigators report unanimously that they have never witnessed a sex orgy or any act of coition in the execution of Voodoo rites. Voodoo is a religion of symbols. Erotic dances in which the act of copulation is simulated are essential elements in the cult of the Ghédés, an elaborate system of rites practiced for the dead. The dances symbolize death and resurrection.

Black magic and sorcery are frequently associated with Voodoo. Charlatanry and fraud undoubtedly exist within the cult, but a genuine Voodoo priest will not stoop to such nefarious practices. In Haiti witchcraft is found for the most part among the followers of the Pétro loas, which are gods of adoption, associated with a certain Don Pédro (Pétro is a Créole corruption of Pédro) a legendary Spanish figure who once lived in Santo Domingo, and who for reasons not well known was deified after his death. Priests of the "old school" of Dahomean Voodoo regard Petro worship as spurious, and reject it.

Voodoo is classified as a genuine religion in as much as it embraces a set of beliefs about spirit beings and their nature and man's relation to them; about the origin of the world and man's relation to it; and about the nature and destiny of man. It includes a system of worship by means of which the individual seeks to cultivate harmonious relations with the spirit beings who, he believes, controls his life and destiny.

Voodoo, like most religions, includes belief in the existence of a Supreme Being who created the world and man. But in Voodoo this God is but vaguely known; for He is utterly transcendent and inaccessible. He is generally apathetic in regard to His creatures and leaves the world to lesser deities. His moral attributes are unknown.

The Voodoo world teems with spirit beings. A Dahomean tradition makes of some of these gods emanations from the

Supreme God rather than His creatures. Others are the deified spirits of ancestors. These gods may be thought of in a vague way as being intermediaries between God and man, but the Voodooist in general does not look beyond the gods of the earth whom he knows so intimately.

These spirits are everywhere, controlling directly every aspect of nature. They cause storm and drought and famine and pestilence, but they also render fertile the earth, send rain in due season, and give health and protection to men. Evil spirits exist also who inflict disease and bring ill fortune. These must be combatted with the help of the good spirits or else placated by means of appropriate sacrifices. Spirits of the dead who have not received proper burial are thought to roam the earth perpetrating deeds of evil.

Some time during life the follower of Voodoo becomes possessed by a deity, usually a family god. By means of this experience, which occurs first at initiation, he becomes the embodiment of a particular deity who remains with him throughout life. In Haiti the individual thus possessed is thought of as the possessing spirit's "horse" which it "mounts", controls, and directs for the remainder of life.

Voodoo regards man as both a child of nature and a child of God. It acknowledges the vital and organic relation of man to the physical universe, which it conceives as being good. All evil, natural and moral, is the direct

result of the activity of the gods. But man is not merely material; he has a soul, which is variously imagined as a distinct but undefined entity which enters the body at birth and leaves it at death; or as the spirit of an ancestor, or occasionally that of a god. Proper orientation of the spirit life by entering into right relations with the gods provides one with guidance and protection throughout life and guarantees him immortality after death.

Highest importance is attached to group life. Ethics are more social than religious and personal. Human nature is not thought of as being inherently moral. Such a designation as "moral man" is hardly possible apart from the individual's relation to "moral society".

However, man does owe a duty to the gods. One not only becomes the obedient servant of the god who "mounts" him, but he must perform occasional services of thanksgiving to the gods who govern nature, making his seed to grow, giving him an abundant harvest, and bestowing numerous other benefits.

If "sin abounds" in the Voodoo world "grace much more abounds"; for there are many ways of exercising or otherwise combatting the forces of evil. Good spirits outnumber evil ones. Voodoo, like all religions, has its myths. Some of these, such as the one about the woman and the forbidden fruit, attempt to explain the origin of evil in the world, but there is no suggestion for its eradication. Voodoo has

"gods many and lords many", but there is not found among them "one like unto the Son of God" who has power to break down the stronghold of Satan and redeem man from the powers of darkness. The clash of power between good and evil does not reach the proportion of a great climatic conflict which will usher in the end of history. There is apparently no idea of an end of history. There is not even a Golden Age whose coming will complete a historical cycle and renew all things. There is no conception of a redemption of nature, no bodily resurrection. Man, caught in the struggle between good and evil forces, makes the best of his lot, learning how to placate the gods by means of appropriate sacrifices and availing himself of the mysterious knowledge of the race by means of which he attains immortal life, either with the gods or in reincarnation.

Admission to membership in the Voodoo society is gained through secret initiation. Lay members pass through two degrees called hounsi-bossal and hounsi-canzo respectively. The precise meaning of these African words is not known, but their significance is fairly clear. The first degree marks the termination of a period of probation during which the candidate undergoes rites of purification, exercises himself in submission and obedience, and learns the ritual of the order. During this time of self-renunciation, which usually lasts about two months, the aspirant is under constant surveillance by the priest and the other hounsis. This period

may be compared in a general way to the period of preparation for baptism practiced in certain Christian sects, but it resembles far more the initial period of trial in Freemasonry or the familiar period of probation of college and other popular fraternities. His probation ended, the aspirant takes an oath pledging respect and obedience to the gods and to his superiors in the society. He may at this point experience mild "possession"--a mere foretaste of things to come. His purification is not yet complete, and the spirits will not dwell in unclean temples.

After taking hounsi-bossal the candidate must continue the process of purification before being admitted to the degree of hounsi-canzo. He must take frequent symbolic baths, observe scrupulously certain days, and pray much. Near the end of the second period of preparation, which is one of indeterminate duration, the candidate appears before the priest and makes full confession of his sins and receives absolution. A special service of purification is performed. The candidate is now symbolically dead and is ready to be raised up to newness of life. If he has entered upon these activities sincerely, he is presumed to be in reality dead to the illusion of self, doubt, and superstition, and has become a vessel worthy of the abode of the spirit.

The initiation of hounsi-canzo is long and complicated and full of symbolism. Hundreds of details appear meaningless to the uninitiated, but must be presumed to have

significance. However, the two great ideas of death and rebirth emerge over and over. The four days spent lying on a mat in the temple court, when all conversation is prohibited, symbolize the loneliness of death. What the number four denotes is not clear, but it may bear some kind of relation to the four cardinal points of which much is made in Voodoo rites, and which probably signify the universality of the things typified. The sacrifice of the pigeons signifies the initiate's willingness to die as a holocaust if need be. The tufts of hair taken from the head, the pubes, and the arm pits represent the soul, and when placed in the govi, the soul is believed to be protected from all evil. The apparent conviction that the vital essence of life resides in the hair may relate to the belief that the hair continues to grow after death.

The initiation is climaxed by "possession" in which the god is believed to enter into and "possess" or "mount" (both terms are used) its servant, effecting in him a complete transformation. The god comes to be known as the "headmaster" (maitre-tête) of his servant whom he never leaves until at death the priest separates the god from its servant's head in a service called "Dessounin".

After initiation, whenever the v^êver of a god is drawn, or whenever the Radas drums begin to beat out a rhythm recognized as that of this particular god, all his servants become possessed.

Various theories have been offered to explain the phenomenon of "possession", but none of them are completely satisfactory. The "split personality" and "group elemental" theories cannot be maintained. Suggestion and hypnotism undoubtedly play an important role. But the real hypnotist is not a man but a religious discipline which through many generations has predisposed the subject to react in a certain way to a given stimulus. Both stimulus and response have been handed down unchanged through centuries of time. The phenomenon of "possession" in Voodoo bears striking resemblance to Japanese god-possession,¹ and is not wholly unlike instances of "baptism of the Holy Ghost" which one may sometimes witness in certain holiness sects in America. No purely psychological explanation of these phenomena is entirely satisfactory. The Voodooist is thoroughly convinced that he embodies a god.

The common meal at the close of a Voodoo service, when a dish of food is passed around for each communicant to take a handful, recalls the Christian Communion. The Radas drums stop or beat low until all have been served. This food has been consecrated to the gods and has thus become their nourishment, their life. In Haiti one says "Loas yo mande mange, nop mange pou yo". (The gods request food, we shall eat for them). The union of god and man which this sacrament

¹ See Percival Lowell, Occult Japan; or the Way of the Gods. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1894), pp. 1-12.

symbolizes is more than symbolic. The presence of the god is real.

These then are the chief means of grace of the Voodoo church: Initiation, which has no Christian counterpart, and which is primarily a process of purification and self-renunciation which prepares for the indwelling of the god; Possession, the actual indwelling of the god, which is at once regeneration and sanctification; Dessounin, a ceremony by means of which the possessing spirit is withdrawn from the head of its subject at death, releasing the soul; Withdrawal of the spirit from the water, a special service which recalls the spirit of the dead from the "lake beneath the earth" where it has spent one year in a kind of purgatory and frees it for all eternity. These four rites are absolutely essential if one is to "lay hold on eternal life".

The third degree of initiation is for priests and priestesses only and is comparable to ordination. The service of Brûler-Zin, which follows the initiation of hounsi-canço, consists of propitiatory rites and prayers of thanksgiving. All persons who have been initiated into the cult are expected to attend with members of their families at least one of these services a year. At this service supplication is made to many if not all the gods. During an invocation the priest calls out the names of scores of deities whose forgiveness is implored. Sacrifices are offered and obligations of long standing are often fulfilled. Each worshipper seeks if possible to wipe his slate clean. Vêvers of many gods are

CHAPTER V

HAITIAN VODOO AND CHRISTIAN EVANGELISM

An effort has been made in previous chapters to trace the formation of the Voodoo religion in West Africa as far as that has been possible, to follow its transplantation and evolution in the New World, and to describe its present form there, especially in the Republic of Haiti. While the force of tradition has preserved in Voodoo all that was essential in the ancient historical cult, it has accommodated itself to its environment by assimilating elements from the systems and institutions which it found at hand. Thus it absorbed the indigenous Pétro deities and appropriated more or less freely from the vestiges of Indian culture which had survived in the Caribbean world. Freemasonry with its air of mystery, its elaborate ritual, its secret initiations, and its claim of great antiquity was especially congenial to the temperament of the Voodoo priests, and Roman Catholicism with its numerous saints and other intermediaries between God and man proved to be compatible with the Voodoo conception of the Divine-human relationship, which also makes use of innumerable gods and genies.

The present chapter will deal exclusively with Voodoo as it has taken form in Haiti with special regard to its relation to Christianity, Catholic and Protestant.

I. THE ATTITUDE OF THE HAITIAN GOVERNMENT TOWARD VODOO

The attitude which the government of Haiti takes toward Voodoo is significant for the reason that the civil administration exercises a measure of control over all religion in the Republic. The Haitian Minister of Foreign Affairs is also Minister of Cults. The combining of these two offices makes possible effective control of all religious sects who recognize a central authority outside of Haiti. In 1951 the Minister announced a new set of rules for the accreditation of pastors and evangelists in the country. On certain occasions, religious or patriotic, every pastor receives a directive from the Minister of Cults calling attention to the importance of the event and sometimes giving specific instructions as to how it should be observed in the churches. A law prescribes a minimum distance which must be observed between two church buildings, and the Code Pénal d'Haiti provides fines and imprisonment up to six months for any person who wears clerical dress without being authorized to do so! These are illustrative examples of governmental regulation of religion in Haiti. Many others could be cited. One would normally expect to find some degree of governmental control of Voodoo also. But here the official rules do not apply; for Voodoo is not recognized by the government as a religion.

Haiti is going all out to promote her budding tourist industry. In 1951 the Chamber of Deputies voted a credit of

\$50,000 (a considerable sum for Haiti) for the restoration of King Christophe's citadel at Cap Haitien, which the Haitian proudly calls the Eighth Wonder of The World. A daily air service has been inaugurated between Port-au-Prince and "le Cap" to accommodate tourists who wish to visit Christophe's stronghold. In making a serious bid for a larger share of the millions of tourist dollars which are spent annually south of Miami, the "New Haiti" has enlisted Voodoo in the tourist trade. The legal proscription of the cult which had been imposed by a previous administration was lifted under the Magloire regime in 1951. Public ceremonies of Voodoo are now permitted subject to an entertainment tax. Thus Voodoo is officially classified along with motion pictures, sports, and other kinds of commercial amusement. President Magloire and the Haitian Tourist Bureau had noticed the curiosity which visitors to the country manifested in Haiti's folk religion; and knowing from past experience that efforts to suppress the practice of Voodoo only drove it underground, decided that it might as well be exploited economically.

There is another motive also for this action by the Haitian civil authorities other than Haiti's hunger for tourist dollars. Prevailing northern notions about Voodoo have long been a source of irritation to élite Haitians. The crude misrepresentations of the religious rites of the people came to be resented. The aura of evil which surrounded the practice of Voodoo in the minds of many persons became distressing.

So peasant groups in and around Port-au-Prince were encouraged to put on wild and phony shows for tourists, giving the impression that Voodoo in Haiti, like Obeah in Jamaica, had become nothing more than impressionistic folk songs and dances. Consequently, one may see today in the streets of Port-au-Prince, Haiti's cosmopolitan capital, more "Voodoo" than he would be likely to witness in many months in the rugged hinterlands where Voodoo still has its stronghold, but this is not Voodoo, for real Voodoo never goes on parade.

The attitude of the present Haitian government towards Voodoo then as a religion is one of indifference. The authorities know how futile are efforts to suppress it; therefore, for the benefit of the tourists and with the cooperation of both the élite and peasant classes, Voodoo has become officially part of the folklore of a gay and carefree people.

II. VODOO AND CATHOLICISM

The Roman Catholic Church, which by virtue of a concordat made between the Haitian government and the Vatican in 1860, enjoys a special position in Haiti, takes an attitude toward Voodoo which is radically different from that of the civil government. For generations the French and Spanish priests sent to Haiti fought a relentless but losing battle against the "rampant paganism" of the Haitian masses. Militant clergymen cut down trees sacred to Damballah and planted crosses on their stumps. Then hither came the people by

night while the white-clad men of God slept, and watched breathlessly as their "other priest" deftly traced around the crucifix-adorned stump Damballah's ancient sign. They knelt in reverence as the houngan chanted a prayer to both Jesus and Damballah. Voodoo had gained a god, Catholicism had gained nothing. Colored lithographs of the saints were distributed among the people. Some of these were sold not as pictures of Catholic saints, but as likenesses of Voodoo loas. They were to grace Voodoo altars side by side with the pagan gouis. Most of the priests prefer to remain in the towns, but some go into the hills, learn the Créole dialect, and are reported to pour out from time to time their righteous fulminations against the heathenism which is still so rife after centuries of zealous evangelism. The Haitian peasant cannot understand these attacks upon his ancestral faith. He accepts willingly, even gladly, the gods of the Catholic Church who serve as intermediaries between God and man, adding them to the pantheon of his own "gods of Guinea". The Haitian peasant rejects nothing in the spirit realm. He goes to church, prays, and hears Mass. The strange speech of the Catholic priest is like the "language" of Guinea spoken by the houngan. The church has had no difficulty at all in acquainting the peasants with certain beliefs and forms, but it has had no success at all in making them exclusive Catholics. The reason for this fact is clear. The peasant mind which has been shrouded in centuries of mist and whose

interest in religion is rarely speculative, does not distinguish between two systems which to it seem similar and mutually complementary. It sees no real conflict between Catholicism and Voodoo. Both worship numerous spirits, both practice magical rites, both make use of charms and fetishes. The Voodooist sees nothing sacrilegious in naming the Holy Virgin and Erzulie in the same prayer. To his mind there is nothing incongruous in making the sign of the cross as he baptizes a Radas drum.

It would be incorrect to say that this has proved a frustrating experience for the Catholic clergy whose patience and fortitude is so well known. But it has made necessary a change of strategy in dealing with Voodoo. The clergy know that direct attack upon Voodoo can never attain its purpose. Therefore the open firmness which once characterized the Catholic approach to Voodoo has in these days largely given way to subtle indirection. The priests have ceased for the most part to fight Voodoo openly, but by the exercise of infinite patience they wait for its slow transformation into a true Catholic faith. They no longer expect to conquer Voodoo in their time, but have great faith in the ultimate victory of the church.

Leyburn thinks that the Roman Catholic Church has three things in its favor in its struggle with Voodoo: (1) worldwide organization which makes possible the throwing in of trained reserves whenever needed; (2) the superior intellectual

equipment of the priests which enable them to employ psychological weapons; (3) the plasticity of Voodoo itself, which, having no written formulations, is easily modified. He sees also as an advantage to the church its ability to become all things to all people.¹ It appears to this investigator that the Roman Catholic Church's absorption of many pagan elements during its long history and its development of a wide variety of beliefs and practices, are precisely the reasons for its failure to convert Haitian peasants from Voodoo. The very similarity of belief and practice between Voodoo and Catholicism is such that the peasant is not persuaded of the necessity of abandoning the one in order to espouse the other. The two are to him completely compatible. Concerning the possibility of eventual transformation of Voodoo into Catholicism, one is forced to note that Voodoo has indeed assimilated much of Catholicism, but it has not given up anything that is distinctively Voodoo. The absorption of Voodoo into the Catholic Church within the foreseeable future would necessitate the latter's acceptance of many more pagan practices.

If one could be placed in the heart of a Haitian town at the hour of Mass on one of the many "jours de fête" which are observed in Haiti, he would probably receive the impression that Haitians are a church-going people and are nearly all Roman Catholic; for shortly before or immediately after

¹ Leyburn, op. cit., p. 173.

the service the streets would be filled with men, women, and children, most of them well dressed, hurrying to or leisurely returning from church. One would not know perhaps that all government employees present themselves at these services under legal compulsion and that for all others church going on special days is largely a social event. But one would need only to visit the "banlieues", the outskirts of town, in order to discover that the majority of the people had not availed themselves of the benefits of these services. Unable to dress properly to mingle with members of the upper class, the peasants remain at home on these days. But on ordinary days the peasants may have early morning mass mostly to themselves.

Most of the élite pay formal homage to the Catholic faith, but their attendance at church is usually casual. If rumors are afloat that one has been active in Voodoo, he may for a time become an assiduous church-goer to offset these rumors. Notwithstanding their remarkable disinterest in the religion which is approved both by the State and society, the élite Haitians, comprising not more than ten per cent (perhaps considerably less) of the total population, require that sermons be preached in French, a language which is incomprehensible to at least ninety per cent of the people. The effect of this prescription is that sermons in the towns and villages are seldom intelligible to the majority of the people. The élite refuse to listen to sermons in Créole,

although every Haitian knows it from infancy and élite and peasant alike use it at all times except in polite society and with foreigners. Some conscientious priests would willingly address the people in the language which all understand were they permitted to do so. However, knowing that its use will be prohibited in the towns and villages, many priests never bother to learn Créole at all and are thus unable to converse intelligibly with the peasants when they meet them by chance. In some instances the Sunday message is further obscured for the peasant who might perchance understand a little French, by the regular attendance at church of a few officials who have a relish for "des idées plus recherchées" and who do not hesitate to tell the priests so. The kind of preaching which they require can be understood only by those who read books.

E. Stanley Jones once gave the following unflattering appraisal of American Democracy and Christianity: "Democracy has become an increasingly seedy affair, and Christianity is chiefly notable for the way in which it does not affect the daily lives of people."² Of course Christianity does affect the daily lives of millions of people and one has only to live in some countries which call themselves Democracies to know how much of real democracy there is in America. To an impartial observer Dr. Jones' judgment might seem far more applicable to Haitian than to American

² Written source unknown.

institutions. Catholicism remains the state religion in Haiti. It is conceivable that through education an important nucleus of genuine Catholics may be built up in a generation or so. But impartial observers have been practically unanimous in their view that today the Catholic faith has no real grip on the Haitian people.

III. VODOO AND PROTESTANTISM

Dr. James G. Leyburn, in the introduction to his chapter on "Roman Catholicism", states, "The only approved religion of the country is Roman Catholicism. . . . No Protestant sect has ever gained a real foothold in Haiti".³ In view of the unprecedented growth of Protestant missionary activity in Haiti since World War II, for reasons the ascertainment of which has not been made a part of this study, Dr. Leyburn's statement might be admitted. Although Protestantism has been operative in Haiti for at least a century and a quarter,⁴ its most significant expansion has probably come about since the publication of Dr. Leyburn's book "The Haitian People" in 1941.

Today at least a dozen Protestant denominations are officially recognized in Haiti. Several of these are not

³ Leyburn, op. cit., p. 113.

⁴ No history of Haitian Protestantism has yet been written. Dr. Héctor Paultre, a Haitian Baptist minister, is at present collecting materials for this purpose.

only well established but are enjoying rapid growth and expansion. No complete census of Haitian Protestants has ever been made. The investigator began late in 1951 a survey designed to ascertain as accurately as possible the number of non-Catholic Christians in the country, but had not more than one half of the returns when the time came for him to return to the United States. The following figures⁵ indicate his findings as far as he went:

<u>BAPTIST GROUPS</u>	<u>NO. OF MEMBERS</u>
The Unevangelized Fields Mission of Philadelphia.	30,000
La Mission Batiste des Antilles.	50,000
The Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Convention, U. S. A.	2,000
The Boaz A. Harris Mission	3,000
The American Baptist Home Mission Convention	_____
The Gershon Toussaint Mission.	2,000
The Pierre Jaques Mission.	2,000
<u>OTHER GROUPS</u>	
The Church of God.	70,000
The Church of God in Christ.	50,000
The Pentecostal Holiness Church.	50,000
The Seventh Day Adventist Church	<u>24,000</u>
TOTAL	283,000

⁵ All these figures are approximate, not exact, and are therefore given in round numbers.

No statistics were received for the following Protestant denominations which are operative in Haiti:

The Free Methodist Church

The Wesleyan Methodist Church

The Presbyterian Church

The Salvation Army

The African Methodist Episcopal Church

L'Armée du Christ

Jehovah's Witnesses

It appears certain on the basis of these partial statistics that Haitian Protestants number in excess of 300,000, or about seven per cent of the total population of the country. This number certainly does not indicate that Haiti has become a Protestant nation. The number of Protestants, however, is probably equal to, if not greater than, the number of persons to whose loyalty the Catholic Church may make just claim. The stark truth is that Haiti remains essentially a Voodoo nation.

Unlike the Catholic priests, Protestant preachers and missionaries demand complete renunciation of Voodoo. Those who express a desire to embrace Christianity are asked to give up their charms and fetishes. Their homes are visited in order to make sure that they have complied with this rule. They must never attend another Voodoo service. However, Protestant missionaries are careful to avoid any open attack on Voodoo as a system. The Protestant approach to Voodoo has

met with some success. Many Haitians have been converted from Voodoo as well as to Protestantism. The chief reason for the relative success of Protestantism in its approach to Voodoo probably lies in the nature of the Protestant faith itself. But the following reasons may be noted as significant:

(1) The Protestant faith is not identified with a social class in Haiti as is Catholicism.

(2) Most Protestant denominations make wide use of native preachers who possess an intimate knowledge of local customs, who are in perfect possession of the language of the people, and who are not held in suspicion by the peasants as foreigners frequently are.

(3) Several of the evangelical denominations offer something which is more or less comparable to the Voodoo experience of "possession". These sects believe in and teach the need of a conversion experience. Concerning the outward expression of that experience no prescription is made. Certain of the "shouting sects" in which the patterns of "baptism of the Holy Ghost", dancing, and other aspects of ritual resemble the familiar Voodoo forms of behavior and which require little psychological shift in order to qualify for membership, have had good reception in some parts of Haiti. But success in evangelism has not been limited to these groups. Some of the more conservative denominations show considerable vitality and growth. While some relapses are to be

expected, a surprising number of conversions to Christianity are genuine and permanent. The transference of loyalty is complete and the "gods of Guinea" become infernal spirits belonging to the principality of Satan, who are to be overcome with the "Sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God".

(4) Since Protestantism in Haiti is largely (although not exclusively) a peasant religion, it makes wide use of the Créole dialect. In recent years hymnals, tracts, and some of the Books of the New Testament have been translated into Créole. Some groups have abandoned their former practice of using Créole in rural areas and French in the towns and cities, and now use Créole exclusively wherever the majority of the people are illiterate. But in order that the situation may not remain static in regard to the education of the people, most rural communities have mission schools where young people of all ages may go and be given elementary instruction in the French language and other subjects. This opens to them a vast new world of written knowledge which does not exist in Créole.

IV. VOODOO'S APOLOGISTS

Voodoo has its defenders. Louis Maximilien, a Haitian physician and author whose book "Le Vodou Haitien" is the most informing work that has come to the hand of the investigator, and whose objective reports he believes to be entirely trustworthy, is nonetheless a Voodoo apologist. Maximilien

believes Voodoo to profess ideas of a generally elevated order, but that many persons being prejudiced toward Voodoo refuse to consider this fact. He points out that the conviction that the earth is holy is integrated in Voodoo belief, and believes that the peasant habit of stripping the soil, hoeing it up in little furrows, abandoning it to erosion, and making no effort to replenish its natural fertility when exhausted, could have been avoided if those who sought to teach them improved methods of agriculture had tied these ideas in with the religious beliefs of the peasants.⁶ Maximilien further notes that the unity of the Haitian people which made possible the successful revolution for independence, is to be credited to Voodoo.⁷ Maximilien's argument in support of Voodoo is buttressed by the practical consideration that the attempts of certain administrations to suppress Voodoo, and Catholic attempts to stamp it out, have been completely unsuccessful. The Haitian doctor further maintains that the suppression of Voodoo, were it possible, would inflict the greatest possible damage upon the Haitian people; that the nervous complex, which sometimes manifests itself so brusquely and unexpectedly, is only the expression of a conscience previously formed; that the Haitian people are constitutionally psychopathic and that all

⁶ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 144.

⁷ Ibid., p. 154.

therapeutics except those realized in the Voodoo discipline are useless in treating them.⁸ He further believes that Voodoo is capable of directing the people to the true God. The affinity which Voodoo has with Christianity is attested by the readiness with which it absorbs Christian principles and practices. Efforts to root it up and replace it with another system must always prove futile. Left alone it will evolve into a religion of the highest order.⁹ These proposals of Maximilien engage one's attention to say the least. The investigator's own conviction in this regard will be stated later when he suggests a Christian strategy for dealing with Voodoo.

The period of sensational writing about Haitian Voodoo seems to have passed, and at the hands of a group of more serious American investigators this folk religion is receiving increasingly sympathetic treatment. Among those who have written appreciatively of Voodoo are Melville J. Herskovits, Northwestern University anthropologist ("Life in A Haitian Valley" and other works); James G. Leyburn, Associate Professor of Sociology, Yale University ("The Haitian People"); Harold Courlander of the University of North Carolina ("Haiti Singing"); George Eaton Simpson of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Oberlin College ("The Belief System of

⁸ Maximilien, op. cit., p. 64.

⁹ Ibid., p. 78.

Haitian Vodun" and other articles); Marcus Bach, Associate Director and Professor of Religion of the School of Religion of Iowa State University ("Strange Altars"). These investigators are, of course, eminently qualified to interpret such social and psychic phenomena as lie within their experience. The weakness of their position in treating Haitian Voodoo would be that of any outsider who has no real opportunity to see Voodoo from the inside. The Haitian says currently, "Toute moune Haitien dé' moune," ("Every Haitian is two individuals"). One who has lived and worked with Haitian peasants knows how true this is. They vie with one another in amiability toward a stranger, but as soon as one attempts to lift the veil of their inviolable inner sanctum, they become secretive and inscrutable. Efforts to induce real Voodooists to perform for pay have proved entirely futile. One may believe the tale related by Professor Bach that after Mrs. Bach had given a mamaloï ten dollars to pose for a picture in the act of drawing a vêver, Mrs. Bach's expensive camera jammed fifteen times, the flash bulb exploding at one time with a loud noise! Later at the camera shop the mechanism functioned perfectly and the Eastman expert could find nothing wrong with it.¹⁰

Dr. Leyburn, who attempted to study Voodoo largely from records of the past making little use of primary sources,

¹⁰ Marcus Bach, Strange Altars. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1952), pp. 150-57.

saw quite clearly, none the less, the genuineness of the Haitian peasant's attachment to his religion as over against the superficial formal homage which the élite pay to the Catholic Church. The Yale sociologist, while neither espousing the one nor execrating the other, is far more critical of the latter than of the former.

Professor Simpson, unwilling to follow the much beaten path to the Catholic Presbytère and to the door of Dr. Price-Mars, Haiti's best known scholar, in order to learn about Voodoo, secured guides and interpreters and went out to Plaisance, a rural village, where he had the good fortune to attend a Voodoo service. He then attempted to supplement his meager stock of information by hiring performers to reenact Voodoo scenes in his living room. This method of attempting to learn about Voodoo accounts, no doubt, for what this investigator believes to be an entirely incorrect analysis of the Voodoo practice of eating for the gods. Professor Simpson writes: "They [the peasants] believe that the way to please them [the gods] is to give them a good time. They do this by providing food, drink, music, songs, dances, and gossip for their enjoyment."¹¹ In the opinion of this investigator the peasants are not trying to give the gods a good time. The sacrifice is expiatory, the

¹¹ George Eaton Simpson, "The Vodun Service in Northern Haiti." *The American Anthropologist*, Vol. 42., No. 2, p. 237.

common meal is sacramental, and the eating and drinking which follow a service are not for the gods at all, but are purely social. Never-the-less, Professor Simpson has tried to be fair to Voodoo. Making few value judgments and contenting himself for the most part with description, he has made a contribution to the understanding of the Voodoo religion.

Voodoo's newest American exponent and unashamed defender is Professor Marcus Bach of Iowa State University, who, after having been guided through the upper and nether realms of Voodoo by Stanley "Doc" Reser,¹² returned to report to his wide-eyed students of religion and to all whom it might concern his more or less settled conviction that Voodoo is essentially nothing more than Christianity by another name.¹³

Perhaps few students of Voodoo would take the position of Maximilien, Reser, and Bach that Voodoo is as good as Christianity, and that if those who come to scoff at the pagan rites would enter into and experience Voodoo, they

¹² Stanley Reser, a Marine physician, went to Haiti with American Occupation forces, fell in love with the country and never returned to the United States. He was for some time head of Haiti's mental hospital and is credited with the achievement of marvelous results in the rehabilitation of Haiti's insane. Reser was once a Utah Mormon and subsequently became a Protestant then a Catholic. In Haiti he discovered Voodoo, became one of its most ardent devotees and later a houngan or priest. He undoubtedly knows Voodoo as no other white man does, but only three times during his more than thirty years in Haiti has he aided a fellow American in getting an inside glimpse of his adopted faith. Marcus Bach was one of these three.

¹³ See Marcus Bach, Strange Altars. (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1952).

would probably remain to pray. But what the serious student will discover is that however unevolved it may be, Voodoo is for millions of people a way of life and that it cannot justly be treated with derision.

CONCLUSION

Notwithstanding the arguments of its apologists, Voodoo remains an inferior religion. The backwardness of its development up to the present time leads one to despair of its ever attaining the rational standards of certain other non-Christian religions. Due to its polytheism no real unity is possible in Voodoo. Aside from a vague and disinterested awareness of a Supreme God nothing in the nature of a uniform dogma can be discovered in it. Its innumerable deities are not in any real sense intermediaries between God and man. The great God is largely forgotten and man seems to be caught in the crossfire of battling deities who act with complete independence. The gods of Voodoo are human-like, capricious, and untrustworthy. They are capable of being influenced and require constant placation. If it was the ethical factor which made the Hebrew religion unique among the ancients, by the same standard Voodoo cannot be expected to make a permanent contribution to human civilization; for its gods do not make demands of a high ethical quality upon men. In the sphere of cosmology no rational system has developed or seems likely to develop within Voodoo. There is little speculative

interest in the created universe, in the power that sustains it, or in what its end may possibly be. There is no order, design, nor purpose in the Voodoo world. The earth remains the battle ground of warring deities. Voodoo has no philosophy of history, no idea of progress, no conception of a Kingdom of God to come either in or beyond history, no consummation of the fellowship of believers, no end of history. Voodoo offers no hope for the redemption of the world nor for the transformation of the social order. It has no "Strong Son of God" to defeat the powers of evil, no "Son of Man" to be the instrument of God's self-revelation and to sympathize with man's condition and help him transcend himself to become like God.

Although it has manifested sufficient plasticity to enable it to appropriate from other religions with which it has had contact, Voodoo has remained for the most part uncreative and static. There seems little reason to hope that Voodoo will ever evolve into a religion of a high order. The only real hope for the spiritual and moral evolution of persons of the Voodoo tradition seems to lie in leading them to abandon their non-Christian faith and to embrace Christianity.

Voodoo's apologists have sometimes pointed to the perversion which Christianity has suffered at the hands of its western professors as though to show that it has become a decadent faith and is ready to be replaced by a younger and more vigorous one. The investigator believes all such

arguments to be without validity, and holds that the Christian faith alone can supply all the needs of man.

However, one may discover in Voodoo belief and practice certain values which are worthy to be conserved, and which may, when reinterpreted in terms of the Christian faith, constitute a "porte ouverte" through which the Christian teacher may pass to a clearer understanding of the votary of Voodoo and through which the latter may be led to embrace the Christian faith without a complete uprooting of all his pagan but none-the-less precious traditions. Some of these values are as follows:

(1) The group solidarity which characterizes the Voodoo cult represents a oneness of relation and interest which the Christian fellowship ought to cherish.

(2) "Possession" is an apparently genuine spiritual experience which has not been widely exploited by Christian evangelists. The tendency seems to be to shy away from what is regarded as an irrational religious ecstasy which is a manifestation of an essentially barbarous nature. Yet the experience of "possession" is quite real, perhaps more real, because less sophisticated, than the "baptism of the Holy Ghost" practiced in some American sects; as real perhaps, within the framework of the Voodooist's conception of spiritual things, as the conversion of a Paul or an Augustine or a Wesley. The ethical implications of "possession" are tremendous. The person possessed is not only directed throughout

the remainder of his life by the possessing deity, but he actually takes on the character of the god to whose authority he yields. Consecration to a Voodoo loa may not always produce a life of high ethical quality, for the gods are themselves often given to caprice; but if the unshakable loyalty which characterizes the Voodoo adept's relation to his god can be transferred to Christ--if the Spirit of Christ instead of that of a loa becomes the indwelling Spirit, what may not be the transforming power of such an experience as "possession"?

(3) The absence of hierarchy among the Voodoo gods in the popular conception, while not to be described as a value to be preserved, simplifies the task of dealing with these deities. They cannot be eradicated. An illiterate people cannot be convinced of their non-existence; so they must be somehow explained. This poses no problem for ministers and teachers of the so-called "Fundamentalist" school who believe as implicitly in the existence of a multiplicity of spirit beings--some good and some evil--as do the Voodooists; the "gods of Guinea" who make claims on men's loyalties and must all be taken for what they are--agents of Satan, mighty pretender to the throne and power of Christ. If Christ be accepted as the one mediator between God and man, all the other gods become as a class his enemies to be eventually subdued by him. The need of continual placation of them will then cease and with it the widely prevalent fear of the

consequences of failure to satisfy them, either through ignorance of what they require or through inability to meet their material demands. This fear is a common one. If a Voodoo devotee delays in meeting an obligation to a loa because of a poor harvest or some other reason, he believes the god to become impatient, and with prolonged delay, angry. Sickness, of which there is much, or ill fortune of any kind is then believed to be sent by the god. The devotee begins to be "troublé". So widespread is this fear complex in Haiti that Maximilien has diagnosed it as an elemental group psychopathology which will respond only to the exorcismal therapy found in the Voodoo discipline. The Voodooist is never quite free from anxiety. Even if he is able to satisfy his own personal god, he is certain to have to resort to measures from time to time to counteract the interference of other spirits. The Christian missionary to Haiti knows no more rewarding experience than that of listening to a convert to Christianity testify in a rapid flow of Créole to his having been finally released after years of trouble, by Jesus whom he now recognizes as "pli gran' mait'" (the greatest master), who not only requires no gift except one's warmest affection and loyalty, but has himself been made the supreme and all-sufficient sacrifice for man.

(4) The period of purification and self-renunciation which precedes initiation in Voodoo may be, and in many cases is, replaced for the convert by a period of study and

preparation for Christian baptism. In place of the mystical rites, devotional services including songs, prayers, sermons, and personal witnessing are held. These services may also include motion pictures, lantern slides, and various kinds of instrumental music. In rural areas where the inviting rhythms of the drums are heard nightly such services must be held every night in the week lest the appeal of those disturbing strains emanating from the feasting grounds of Damballah prove too much for the Christian novitiate.

(5) The Services of Thanksgiving which are held several times during the year, usually after an initiation, honor all the gods, representing in effect a truce among them. This idea of periodic or regular public celebrations in recognition of divine favor has undoubted value.

(6) The idea of a Supreme Universal God in Voodoo provides, it would seem, a sound base upon which a Christian concept of God can be built. Central in the thought of Jesus about Himself, His work, the Kingdom, and all else, was His idea of God--or perhaps one should say His experience of God. The whole of His life was shaped by what He conceived God to be. God to Jesus was a God of infinite mercy and good will. He was no mere creator and ruler, remote and largely indifferent, no mere stern judge and giver of laws. He was a God who was by nature merciful, whose providence reached out to embrace the dying flower and the thriftless bird, and in a special way the children of men who are made in His

image.¹⁴ God watches over the life of each individual man, and each is heard who goes to Him in sincere prayer.¹⁵ Good and evil men are alike the objects of His mercy.¹⁶ His love surpasses that of an earthly father.¹⁷ God's love is not general and passive. It is active and eager, taking the initiative in the salvation of those who are lost.¹⁸ The gift of His Kingdom to men will be the outflow of His own free and effusive love.

But God is not a God of moral indifference. He exercises authority and demands from His creatures an attitude of reverence and humility.¹⁹ He is a God of moral supremacy, and He challenges men to strive toward the attainment of moral perfection, which is both the ideal at which men are to aim and the standard by which they are to be judged.²⁰ He is a God, who, though loving and merciful, patient and longsuffering, will in His own good time summon all men to judgment and mete out to them their just rewards and punishments, on the basis

¹⁴ Matt. 6:25-30.

¹⁵ Matt. 6:6-8; 10:29-31.

¹⁶ Matt. 5:45.

¹⁷ Matt. 7:9-11.

¹⁸ Luke 15.

¹⁹ Luke 12:4-5.

Matt. 11:25.

²⁰ Matt. 25:31-46.

of the love they have shown for God manifested in service to others.²¹

Passing over the more primitive Old Testament ideas of God, and avoiding as far as possible the metaphysical subtleties and philosophical abstractions which have entered into Christian thought, the Christian missionary might with great profit present as simply and directly as possible to the primitive mind the God of Jesus as portrayed in the New Testament and especially the Gospels.²²

The investigator does not believe that the above list exhausts the religious and ethical values which are to be found in Voodoo. He is also aware that he has not proposed a full and adequate strategy for dealing with Voodoo. He recognizes the value of a knowledge of human psychology and of the techniques of Christian Education. But he believes that beyond these useful tools and paramount in every respect is the preaching of "Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God".²³

²¹ Matt. 25:31-46.

²² The investigator does not intend to suggest that there is not to be found in parts of the Old Testament a high conception of God, nor that there are no values worthy of preservation in Christian thought outside of the New Testament. He believes the Gospel should be made as simple as possible for persons to whom it is new.

²³ I Corinthians 1:23.

The approach to Voodoo which has been most rewarding in the experience of the investigator and of numerous other Christian missionaries with whom he has consulted has been the direct method of preaching Christ to persons who are "troubled" by the Voodoo loas. A common practice in rural Haiti is that of a band of Christians going unannounced into an unevangelized community usually on a Sunday afternoon and holding an open air service. This could be, and is frequently done during the week, also, for Haitians are seldom too busy to leave their work and go to listen to something new. The band of Christians will enter the village of "habitation" singing as they go. In these populous areas a sizable crowd will have already gathered by the time the chorus reaches the center of the village. Créole translations of Christian hymns and songs are used on these occasions. The "predicateur" will now proceed to deliver a short sermon which may begin something like this: "My dear friends, we come to bring you good news. Are the loas troubling you? Are you distressed? Discouraged? Burdened? Have you heard of Jesus the Son of God who created us, who came down to earth, lived among men, taught that God loves us, and gave himself as a sacrifice for all people, who arose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and whose spirit is present to relieve all our burdens and give us peace? We know this Jesus and we have come to tell you what He has done for us." The Bible will be introduced and some passage read and explained. Then several

of the Christians may testify of their own Christian experience. No stress is laid upon sin because the Christian concept of sin is not known among the people. That will come later. But the idea of sacrifice has tremendous appeal, for sacrifice plays a large part in Voodoo rites. No special techniques are used in these services. No effort is made to persuade persons to accept Jesus. They are simply invited to "try" Him. Many do, for many are weary of their life under the rule of the loas.

While a few Haitian missionaries have developed special rituals for exercising the evil spirits, and some practice healing (often with surprising results) it would not be correct to credit to these techniques the considerable number of apparently genuine conversions which occur every year in Haiti. These can only be attributed to the transforming power of God in Jesus Christ.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A. BOOKS

- Bach, Marcus, Strange Altars. New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1952.
- Brinton, Donald G., Religions of Primitive Peoples. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1897.
- Clark, Elmer T., The Small Sects in America. Nashville, Tennessee, The Cokesbury Press, 1937.
- Courlander, Harold, Haiti Singing. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939.
- Dye, Eva N., Bolonge. Foreign Mission Christian Society (n.p.), 1910.
- Fahs, Sophia Lyon, Uganda's White Man at Work. New York: Young People's Missionary Movement, 1907.
- Frazer, James George, The Golden Bough. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1928.
- _____, Aftermath Supplement to the Golden Bough. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1937.
- _____, The Native Races of Africa and Madagascar. London: The Macmillan Company, 1938.
- Herskovits, Melville J. and Frances F., "An Outline of Dahomean Religious Belief," The American Anthropologist, No. 40.
- Hopkins, E. Washburn, The History of Religion. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1923.
- Hoyt, William B., Liberia and Cape Palmas. Hartford, Connecticut: Case, Tiffany, and Company, 1852.
- Kingsley, Mary H., West Africa Studies. London: The Macmillan Company, Ltd., 1899.
- Leyburn, James G., The Haitian People. New Haven, Connecticut: The Yale University Press, 1941.

- Loederer, Richard A., Voodoo Fire in Haiti. New York: The Country Life Press, 1935.
- Lowell, Percival, Occult Japan or the Way of the Gods. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1894.
- Mackenzie, William Douglass, South Africa. Chicago: American Literary and Musical Association, 1899.
- Maximilien, Louis, Le Vodou Haitien. Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie de l'Etat, 1945.
- McComas, Henry C., The Psychology of Religious Sects. London: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1912.
- Miligan, Robert H., The Jungle Folk of Africa. London: Fleming R. Revell Company, 1908.
- Nassau, Robert Hamill, Fetichism in West Africa. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907.
- Noss, John B., Man's Religions. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940.
- Ojike, Mbonu, My Africa. New York: The John Day Company, 1926.
- Puckett, Newbell Niles, Folk Beliefs of the Southern Negro. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 1926.
- Seabrook, W. B., The Magic Island. New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1929.
- Simpson, George Eaton, "The Vodun Service in Northern Haiti", The American Anthropologist, Vol. 42, No. 2.
- Spencer, John, Hayti or the Black Republic. New York: Scribner and Welford, 1889.
- Steedman, Mable, Unknown to the World. London: Hurst and Black, 1939.
- Wieman, Henry Nelson and Walter Marshall Horton, The Growth of Religion. Chicago: Willett, Clark, and Company, 1938.

B. OTHER REFERENCES

The Bible (Revised Standard Version).

The Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. XXIII.